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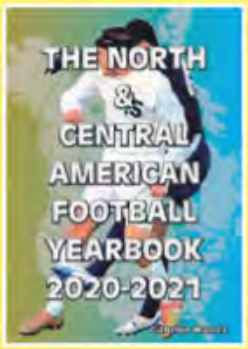

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The global game caught on camera

Switzerland...Bayern's Robert Lewandowski is named The Best FIFA Men's Player ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi via video link

Argentina...Palmeiras forward Rony celebrates with an acrobatic backflip after scoring in the Copa Libertadores semi-final against River Plate

Spain...Barcelona presidential candidate Joan Laporta launches his campaign with this poster – just metres from Real Madrid's Bernabeu stadium

England...Sebastien Haller scores a sensational bicycle kick for West Ham United against Crystal Palace in the Premier League

France...Istanbul Basaksehir assistant coach Pierre Webo looks on during the rearranged fixture v PSG – the original game was postponed after alleged racist comments from the fourth official

Qatar...Ulsan Hyundai players celebrate with club owner Han Young-seuk after winning the AFC Champions League

Mexico...Club Leon celebrate beating Pumas UNAM in the 2020 LigaMX Guardianes final as they're crowned Mexican champions for the eighth time

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FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

Last month's issue of *World Soccer* was all set and ready to go to the printers, before the seismic news of Diego Maradona's death meant that a drastic re-write was in order. Sadly, the bad news didn't stop there. Shortly afterwards, Argentina mourned their former national team coach Alejandro Sabella as well, before Italy lost their own World Cup hero, Paolo Rossi. A week later, Gerard Houllier passed away, and British football has since said goodbye to Jim McLean, Tommy Docherty and Colin Bell. We've done our best to celebrate the lives of these great men (page 18-19), while our man in Italy, Paddy Agnew, has his own tribute for Rossi on page 28.

In amongst all the gloom, there are some beams of light, and none brighter than Marcus Rashford. Ryan Baldi has been back to the Manchester United star's roots to speak to some of the people that helped make him the hero that he is today (page 36). The forward is set for a big year, and he's not the only one – he's likely to be joined in England's Euro 2020 squad by Jack Grealish (page 46) and Conor Coady (page 60), while Nick Bidwell has picked out a whole host of other talking points for the rest of 2021 (page 54).

Congratulations to the club champions of Africa, Asia and CONCACAF...who now proceed to the upcoming Club World Cup

Finally, congratulations to the club champions of Africa, Asia and CONCACAF – Al Ahly of Egypt (page 32), Ulsan Hyundai from South Korea (page 78), and Tigres of Mexico (page 76) – who now proceed to the upcoming Club World Cup. At the time of writing, we are still waiting to find out who will be joining them in Qatar, with the Copa Libertadores final still to be played.

However, next month's issue will feature coverage of both competitions, as well as the Copa Sudamericana.

Jamie Evans, Assistant Editor

ENGLAND

Trippier case set to rumble on

England defender Kieran Trippier's ten-week ban for a breach of gambling regulations has sparked a debate about the validity of certain betting markets and football's role in policing them.

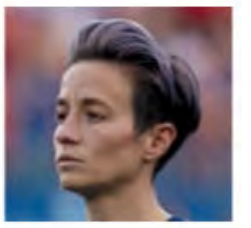
Trippier, who was also fined £70,000, was found guilty after transcripts of messages showed him discussing his move to Spain in the summer of 2019 with friends, who then placed bets on the transfer going ahead. The England defender even told one friend to "lump on if you want", later asserting that the messages were just "banter".

Yet the case has raised doubts, with many observers questioning why bookmakers should offer odds on markets that are so open to manipulation by insider knowledge, or indeed why it is The FA's responsibility to uphold the validity of such markets. Last year, Daniel Sturridge was handed a four-month ban for a similar offence, following an appeal from The FA who argued the original six-week ban (four of which were suspended) "wholly failed to reflect the gravity of the case".

Trippier's ban is now suspended while Atletico appeal the decision, with coach Diego Simeone insisting his team are being unfairly unpunished.

"I am obviously very honoured to have been recognised by my peers around the world who vote for the FIFPRO World XI. At the same time, it did come as a surprise...I haven't played since March"

Megan Rapinoe questions her inclusion in the World XI, emphasising the need for more exposure of the women's game



Banned...Trippier joined Atletico Madrid in 2019

EUROPE

More awards rain down on Bayern

Bayern Munich capped a memorable 2020 by adding yet more gongs to their impressive collection at the Best FIFA Football Awards, although coach Hansi Flick did miss out on the manager's prize. In the women's category, Lucy Bronze was named Player of the Year.

2020 BEST FIFA AWARDS

Men's Player	Robert Lewandowski
Men's Coach	Jurgen Klopp
Men's Goalkeeper	Manuel Neuer
FIFPRO Men's XI	Alisson, Trent Alexander-Arnold, Sergio Ramos, Virgil van Dijk, Alphonso Davies, Kevin De Bruyne, Thiago, Joshua Kimmich, Lionel Messi, Robert Lewandowski, Cristiano Ronaldo
Puskas Award	Son Heung-min
Women's Player	Lucy Bronze
Women's Coach	Sarina Wiegman
Women's Goalkeeper	Sarah Bouhaddi
FIFPRO Women's XI	Christiane Endler, Lucy Bronze, Wendie Renard, Millie Bright, Barbara Bonansea, Veronica Boquete, Tobin Heath, Delphine Cascarino, Megan Rapinoe, Pernille Harder, Vivianne Miedema

HEROES & VILLAINS

Celebrating...Lee and Sadio Mane

SADIO MANE

In November, the Liverpool forward chatted via Zoom with Lee, a Liverpool fan and food bank volunteer. "You know me, I like to copy celebrations – if you have any celebrations show me now," Sadio asked. Kissing his fingers and raising them to the sky, Lee replied: "For my Grandad." Sure enough, when Mane next found the net, in the 7-0 win over Crystal Palace, he happily obliged.

DEJAN LOVREN

Following the devastating earthquake in Petrinja, Croatia, which killed seven people, the former Liverpool defender pledged to accommodate victims at his hotel on the coast. "Dear citizens of Petrinja, I am making my hotel in Novalja available to the 16 most endangered families," the Zenit centre-back wrote on Instagram. "If you need temporary accommodation, contact my team."

SKY

Having been a vocal supporter of racial equality throughout the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, Sky have pledged £3 million of funding to Kick It Out. The anti-racism charity have been underfunded over recent years, relying on relatively small sums from The FA, EFL and PFA, but their new partnership with Sky will be a big boost.

NINO

By scoring in Elche's Copa del Rey clash with Bunol, the 40-year-old striker made history as the competition's oldest-ever goalscorer. Then, a few weeks later, the ancient striker became the first player in history to play 700 games in Spain's top two divisions (129 in La Liga and 571 in Segunda). His next target will be to break Donato's record as La Liga's oldest scorer. Ironically, "niño" is Spanish for "kid".

MARCUS THURAM

The 23-year-old Monchengladbach forward was hit with a six-match ban and a €40,000 fine from the DFB after seeing red for spitting at an opponent in his side's 2-1 league defeat to Hoffenheim. In addition, Gladbach also fined Thuram a month's wages, around €150,000, reportedly the biggest sanction in the club's history. "That is not in my character and must never happen," he said on Instagram afterwards.

DEJPHON CHANSIRI

Under the Thai businessman's ownership, Sheffield Wednesday have had an eventful 12 months. Last summer they were docked 12 points – later reduced to six – for breaking EFL spending rules, and in December the PFA was called in over unpaid wages. The most recent twist in the club's rollercoaster year came when Tony Pulis was fired after just 45 days in charge.

COVID RULE BREAKERS

Further incidents occurred over the festive period of footballers flouting lockdown rules. Tottenham players Giovani Lo Celso, Erik Lamela and Sergio Reguilon were pictured with West Ham United's Manuel Lanzini over Christmas, while Crystal Palace captain Luka Milivojevic apologised for breaching coronavirus rules after he attended a New Year's Eve party with Fulham's Aleksandar Mitrovic.

LEEDS UNITED FANS

Some fairly innocuous observations about Leeds from Amazon Prime pundit Karen Carney ahead of their 5-0 win over West Brom in December led to an extraordinary reaction on social media. First from the club itself, who made light of the comments following the victory, and then from fans, who flooded Carney's Twitter account with so much sexist abuse that she was forced to close her personal account on the platform.

Hounded...Karen Carney

"The energy was gone for a while. Then stopping will go through your head. But a little voice in my head kept me from doing that… I really want to play for the club, but of course it is all frustrating"

Arjen Robben reveals he's already contemplated retiring for a second time due to injuries

Dominik SZOBOSZLAI

(RB Leipzig)

At the start of December, Szoboszlai and RB Salzburg seemed set for a January filled with straight-batting questions about the player's future, with several of Europe's biggest clubs – including Real Madrid, Arsenal and Juventus – all queuing up to sign him.

But in mid-December, Salzburg announced that the playmaker would be joining their sister club, RB Leipzig for €20 million, and speculation over his future was ended – for now at least. The 20-year-old will hone his skills in the Bundesliga, but a big-money offer will probably arrive for him in a few years.

And it is clear to see why. The left-footed Hungarian is a graceful dribbler with quick feet and an eye for goal, as he proved in the Euro 2020 play-off versus Iceland. With just seconds left on the clock, he glided up the pitch before firing home from the edge of the box.

There is surely much more to come.

PEDRI
(Barcelona)
The 18-year-old winger has provided a rare positive for Barca after striking up a promising partnership with Lionel Messi.

Timothee PEMBELE
(Paris Saint-Germain)
The 18-year-old defender made his Champions League debut and scored his first PSG goal before Christmas.

Brian BROBBEY
(Ajax)
The powerful striker was singled out by Ajax director Edwin van der Sar as one to watch after making his Champions League debut in December.

Cody GAKPO
(PSV)
Eindhoven born and bred. Ended 2020 as one of PSV's top three league scorers with Donyell Malen and Noni Madueke.

James TAVERNIER
(Rangers)
The right-back scored or assisted 19 Scottish Premiership goals by the New Year – more than anybody in the league.

Nadiem AMIRI
(Bayer Leverkusen)
An early contender for the 2021 Puskas Award for his stunning wondergoal versus Eintracht Frankfurt: a slick move finished with an outrageous backheel.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Time to go for Jogi Low

Joachim Low has stayed on too long as Germany coach, a reality confirmed beyond any doubt when his team lost 6-0 to Spain in the Nations League.

He is suffering from a problem granted to only a few exceptional managers – the longer they defy common sense and deny the inevitable, the more agonising it becomes for fans, players and themselves.

The most compelling example is Arsene Wenger. He was an outstanding manager for longer than anyone could expect at Arsenal. That didn't prevent his last two years becoming a torment as the home crowd turned on a hero. Wenger resisted; his pride, ego and obsession blinding him to reality.

Another contrary example is Jurgen Klopp. He was brilliant at Borussia Dortmund for six years before a final few months of torment. He had the wisdom, self-awareness and humility to walk away of his own volition.

Perhaps this is a matter of time. Klopp had not been at Dortmund long enough to be fooled into believing he should remain forever. Low has been in charge of Germany for 14 years – 189 international matches – with a magnificent win rate just over 63 per cent. He won the World Cup in 2014 and reached the final of Euro 2008.

His longevity matches that of Helmut Schon (1964-78), but no other major national team coach comes near in modern times. Sir Alf Ramsey spent 11 years with England – 113 matches and one World Cup triumph. Vicente del Bosque had eight years with Spain – 114 games and a World Cup win. Italy's Enzo Bearzot lasted nine years – 88 games as another World Cup winner.

Low is defying logic as he tries to defy a cavalry charge of critics. He pretends the problem does not exist.

"I'm always open to constructive criticism," he said at the World Cup qualifying draw. "But we are sticking to our plan. There is no need to make drastic changes. We are absolutely convinced of the road we have taken."

Low spoke knowing he had been given strong support by his employers at the DFB after the 6-0 thrashing by Spain, despite a hostile public mood. Loyalty is usually to be admired in this sporting world bedevilled by so much short-term thinking. But not always.

The crisis for the German national team is not just about poor results and slipping down the FIFA rankings. More pertinent is that domestic TV ratings have plummeted for games. There was also a sceptical reaction to a move by the DFB to promote the side as "*Die Mannschaft*"; a term used more by foreigners than within Germany itself.

It was designed to create the sense of a new beginning after the disaster of the 2018 World Cup. It would have been wiser just to change the coach.

Time's up...Low is under pressure after the 6-0 defeat

Low's response was to shake up his team; axing experienced players like Mats Hummels, Thomas Muller and Jerome Boateng and trusting in youth. This was a reasonable decision, but it caused controversy with the insensitive way it was handled. It also had to work, to be backed up by results. Instead, there was that crushing 6-0 defeat. Even this could not make Low resign.

The DFB are equally culpable for keeping him. It's not as if Germany is bereft of high-class coaches – Klopp, Thomas Tuchel, Julian Nagelsmann and Hansi Flick can all be considered among Europe's elite caching talents.

A new narrative is now popular in Germany following the recent success of Bayern Munich. It says that the national team flourished at a time when Flick was Low's unheralded assistant, and the Bayern coach was the real brains of the outfit. True? Only the pair of them will know.

What is certainly true is that Bayern Munich continue to have success despite changing coaches frequently. Even if the DFB cannot tempt Flick to be the next coach of Germany, the example of Bayern's renewal following a decisive change of leadership is surely the one for them to follow.

> A new narrative is now popular in Germany… the national team flourished at a time when Flick was Low's unheralded assistant, and the Bayern coach was the real brains of the outfit

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Shadow hangs over CAF presidency as elections approach

Shakira belted out: "This time for Africa!" from the opening match at the 2010 World Cup through to the final. It was, briefly, but not any more.

Sepp Blatter, then FIFA's president, bore a missionary's obsession with bringing the complex continent up to speed on and off the pitch through football. That was one of Blatter's better ideas and he saw the World Cup as the means to open the door.

Political shenanigans had seen the 2006 finals sent to Germany so the 2010 award was restricted, with South Africa outbidding Morocco and Egypt. FIFA threw means and money at the project, and its success owed much to the night-and-day efforts of secretary-general Jerome Valcke (now, like Blatter, on the naughty step).

Bear in mind, the IOC has never dared take the Olympic Games to Africa at all.

Back in 2010 South Africa was alone among the African nations equipped to stage and support the finals. But that was a tournament with "only" 32 teams. No African nation could host the 48-team brainchild of current FIFA boss Gianni Infantino, and it is impossible to envisage any two or three or four neighbours sinking regional rivalries to co-host.

The sad truth is that the World Cup finals will not be heading back to Africa any time in the foreseeable future. Morocco may continue to extend its record of unsuccessful bids but Asia will have hosted the finals twice (Qatar in 2022 and, probably, China in 2034) before any further calendar gaps open up.

Logistics and international football politics are two barriers. A third is the confused state of African football itself – the administration, that is, not the players. Directors and officials, who failed consistently to put their own houses in order, have betrayed the wonderful footballers that Africa has sent out into the world game.

Of course, it's easy to point a finger of blame at individuals. Good and bad apples are running football in Europe, Asia and the Americas. It's just that bad apples have inflicted the greatest disease upon the body politic of African football and within CAF.

World Cup performance is a handy, if simplistic, guide to progress and then stasis. I witnessed Zaire's nine-goal collapse against Yugoslavia in West Germany in 1974 but then, later, Cameroon's overturning of defending champions Argentina in 1990, Senegal's matching defeat of France in 2002 and the penalties pyrotechnics of Ghana's 2010 quarter-final against Uruguay.

More than 1,000 African footballers populate leagues across Europe with the likes of Mo Salah and Sadio Mane international icons at the top of the English Premier League alone. The conundrum is that the more young Africans are drawn abroad the more impoverished the leagues they leave behind.

In 2019, Infantino grew so frustrated with CAF that he sent in his Senegalese secretary-general Fatma Samoura as a one-woman "normalisation committee". She reclaimed centralised control over World Cup TV rights and trimmed back the executive committee's per diems cash culture. But the longer she stayed the more she was resented and resisted.

Samoura fled back to Zurich last year, coincidentally just before the COVID pandemic brought international and most national sport juddering to a bankruptcy-threatening standstill.

There are no easy answers. Perhaps even no answers at all. But effective leadership from and within CAF should be a start.

The 54 full member associations of CAF can shortly pull the leadership

This time for Africa...the 2010 World Cup was a high point for African football

> Directors and officials have betrayed the wonderful footballers that Africa has sent out into the world game

Disgraced... CAF president Ahmad Ahmad

back on course. On March 12 in Rabat, Morocco, CAF will stage its presidential election. This will be African football's most important ballot in a generation after decades of corruption and cronyism.

CAF has had only six presidents: Abdel Aziz Salem (Egypt, 1957-58), Abdel Aziz Moustafa (Egypt, 1958-68), Abdel Halim Muhammad (Sudan, 1968-72), Ydnekatchew Tessema (Ethiopia, 1972-87), Issa Hayatou (Cameroon, 1988-2017) and, since 2017, Ahmad Ahmad from Madagascar.

Ahmad emerged from virtually nowhere four years ago to end Hayatou's reign with behind-the-scenes support from Infantino. Ahmad promised competition upgrades, administrative reform and financial transparency but has created only dirt and derision. A FIFA ethics investigation and five-year ban – pending appeal – should prevent him standing for re-election.

The investigation followed charges that Ahmad, allegedly, paid $20,000 in bribes to various FA presidents, that he inappropriately axed an equipment contract with Puma in favour of a little-known French company named Tactical Steel and that he over-spent $400,000 on cars in Egypt and Madagascar. He was also accused of harassing four female members of the CAF staff. Ahmad has denied it all.

So this is the scenario surrounding the leadership of African football. That is without even delving into erratically-organised national associations and leagues where lack of funds, vote-rigging and match-fixing are exacerbated by the plundering of talent by greedy agents selling youngsters the European dream before abandoning them to their fate.

The task of leading CAF into a brave, new era was tough enough before COVID. Now it is infinitely more challenging.

Four men believe they can do a better job than beleaguered Ahmad: Jacques Anouma (Ivory Coast), Augustin Senghor (Senegal), Patrice Motsepe (South Africa) and Ahmed Yahya (Mauritania).

Anouma is an old hand at CAF and FIFA politics. The 69-year-old has played a major role in local politics and business (Air France and Renault) and was a CAF delegate to the FIFA exco-turned-council from 2006 to 2015. Along the way a first bid for the presidency in 2013 was blocked when a worried Hayatou changed the eligibility rules.

Senghor is president of the Senegalese federation but it's unlikely he is being encouraged by compatriot Samoura on behalf of Infantino. In any case, he has been on the CAF executive committee for less than a year. Northern neighbour Yahya, from Mauritania, might be worth watching though. He was the FFRIM's national teams director then general secretary before becoming president in 2011. Either man might seek to fashion a self-seeking regional deal ahead of the vote. But, Motsepe is definitely the most intriguing of the quartet.

The South African mining mogul is one of the richest men on the continent with Forbes reporting his personal worth as $2.1 billion. He is being promoted by SAFA president Danny Jordaan who knows all about the snakes and ladders of African football politics.

Motsepe did not help his image last January when he told US President Donald Trump that Africa loved him. Motsepe cosied up to Trump during the World Economic Forum in Davos. Critics attacked his assumption of the right to speak on behalf of Africa as a whole.

The owner of Mamelodi Sundowns claims the support of influential Nigeria, Botswana and Sierra Leone but faces an uphill battle, for all his millions: no-one from Anglophone Africa has ever headed CAF. The Arab-speaking and Francophone lobbies have always wielded far superior influence in the corridors of power. This time around Anouma, Senghor and Yahya will probably negotiate the path for a single Arab/Francophone candidate before election day.

Still, all four challengers for Ahmad's crown have time to press their case, drum up and count the promises before realism cuts in. The outcome may be important for the world game, but it's crucial for CAF. As Shakira sang:

You're on the front line
Everyone's watching
You know it's serious
We're getting closer
This isn't over
The pressure's on,
You feel it . . .
This time for Africa!

WINNERS

ROMELU LUKAKU
No player in Internazionale's history has scored 50 goals as quickly as the Belgium ace, reaching the target in just 70 games.

KARIM BENZEMA
The striker recently surpassed left-back Roberto Carlos' record of 527 Real Madrid appearances by a non-Spaniard. The Frenchman is now closing in on the all-time top ten.

CORNELLA
The Spanish third-tier side, who play in the shadow of Espanyol's stadium, stunned La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid 1-0 in the Copa del Rey.

PELE
After Messi and Ronaldo overtook goal records of his, Pele's old club Santos insisted that Leo is still 447 goals short of the full record, which includes friendlies.

SEKOU KOITA & MOHAMED CAMARA
The RB Salzburg duo both failed drugs tests after taking medication for altitude sickness while on international duty with Mali.

LIGUE 1
The French top flight was plunged into crisis after their primary broadcaster Mediapro pulled the plug early on their €814 million-per-season deal.

LOSERS

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Southgate's search for perfect balancing act

Major tournaments are very rarely won by the most attacking team. International football is, of necessity, less complex than club football. Managers have far less time to prepare their players and their squad will often change radically from one meet-up to the next. So functionality prevails. It's simply not possible to impose the sort of complex attacking systems that dominate at the highest level of club football, and that's why international sides can often seem so slow and lacking in fluency, particularly when faced with a massed defence.

In turn that's why frustration so rapidly sets in. An audience watches a national team struggle to take apart a disciplined opponent and immediately the call is for whichever creator happens to be in form to be introduced, for the side to be built around them, despite the fact that no top-level side has been built around one player for at least 30 years. Add in the fact that Gareth Southgate has been in charge of England for four years now, a period after which familiarity has seemingly begun to breed impatience among both media and public, and the conditions are in place for a largely self-induced meltdown this summer.

Under pressure... Southgate has been criticised for his defensive approach

At the World Cup, England were solid enough with their back three, clever with set plays and had in Harry Kane a forward who, despite being out of sorts, kept scoring goals. The draw was kind, and often that is enough. Southgate's two obvious achievements were in generating the quasi-club atmosphere he had seen inspire Wales at Euro 2016 and, though his obvious decency and dignity, making England a far less unlikable side. He needlessly invited pressure late on against Colombia and was slow to react when England lost control of midfield against Croatia, but broadly speaking Russia 2018 was a success for England.

> Defensively vulnerable sides do not win major international tournaments...so in 2020, Southgate returned to something more functional and reinstated his back three

To Southgate's credit, he kept evolving and switched to a 4-3-3, which both allowed England to make better use of their fleet of quick attacking wide players and gave them an extra body in central midfield to combat the sort of issues that had undermined them against Croatia. That brought a memorable win away to Spain in the Nations League – even if, having raced into a 3-0 lead, England were clinging on by the end. In their ten games in 2019, England scored 38 goals, but they also looked very vulnerable defensively in defeats to the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, and the 5-3 win over Kosovo.

Defensively vulnerable sides do not win major international tournaments; it's 50 years since the World Cup was won by a team that was not fundamentally pragmatic. So in 2020, Southgate returned to something more functional and reinstated his back three. At its most basic level, the 3-4-3 he has adopted makes sense for national sides. The three central defenders protected by two deep-lying midfielders provide a

Options...England's attack has plenty of strength in depth

naturally solid base, while the wide forwards have latitude without their movement much disrupting the defensive shape.

In terms of offering solidity, it has largely worked. In eight games in 2020, England conceded just four goals. Two were penalties, one of which probably wasn't a foul; one was a direct free-kick that wasn't a foul; and the other squirmed in via two deflections, a touch off the keeper and the post. But there has been a corresponding diminution of England's attacking prowess.

Southgate, it's fair to say, is still working on the balance. Against Belgium at Wembley in October, England in the first half suffered a problem similar to that faced against Croatia in the World Cup as they were overrun in midfield. Southgate has been criticised for a failure to make tactical in-game changes, but there he pulled Mason Mount deeper, advanced the wing-backs and solved the problem as England had the better of the second half. That versatility, perhaps, is why he rates Mount so highly.

Can he afford a more creative player deep in midfield, as he tried by using Mount there against the Republic of Ireland and Iceland in November? Jack Grealish is in form and has become something of a cause celebre, but by playing him on the left Southgate loses a player whose natural game is to run beyond Kane when he drops deep. That could perhaps be balanced by using a more direct, quicker player on the right (Raheem Sterling? Jadon Sancho?) rather than Mount who started there away against Belgium, but does that then mean there's no place for Marcus Rashford? And where can he fit Phil Foden, who excelled against Iceland?

The nature of international football, and probably especially in this most exhausting of seasons, means a lot of those decisions may be made for him by injury or other external factors. But at the moment, England have a relatively solid base and a range of differing options both in midfield and either side of Kane. From that point of view, if the recent Nations League is regarded as preparation for the Euros, the negativity is difficult to understand.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Leonid Slutsky... AKA Mariah Carey

1 ALL I WANT FOR CHIRSTMAS IS...WHO?

How about this for a video title that you never thought you'd see: "Former Russia and Hull City manager Leonid Slutsky covers Mariah Carey's *All I Want For Christmas Is You*."

Now managing Rubin Kazan, Slutsky was enlisted by his club to star in their Christmas video, and the results are incredible, with the 49-year-old's auto-tuned vocals accompanied by scenes of him on stage and sat at the Christmas table, while his players dance around it opening presents.

2 MUSICAL MASCOT

Bizarrely, that's not this month's only musical story. This one is from Brazil, where somebody at Corinthians has noted that the club have never lost a game when Taylor Swift releases a new album. The singer-songwriter's latest record, *evermore*, was sandwiched in between a draw and a victory for the Brazilians, stretching the lucky streak to nine consecutive albums and 18 matches. As a result, fans of the club have now adopted Swift as their unofficial mascot.

3 DIDIER LAMKEL ZE

At the end of 2020, *World Soccer* brought you the story of Didier Lamkel Ze – the bad boy of Belgian football who had found himself out of favour at Royal Antwerp. As if determined to live up to his reputation, the striker began 2021 by attempting to force through a move to Panathinaikos and arrived at his club's training ground wearing the shirt of their biggest rivals, Anderlecht. Unsurprisingly, his new attire didn't go down well, with *Sportwereld.be* capturing images of security staff preventing him from entering the building.

"I want to apologise to the club and to the Antwerp supporters, because they are magnificent and wonderful supporters. They have always supported me," he said later via the club's Twitter account.

4 PUPPY PITCH INVADER

It seems that this column would not be complete without a tale of an animal interrupting a game of football. This time the story is from Bolivia, where a dog not only ran onto the pitch, but did so with a substitute's boot in his mouth.

The clash between Nacional Potosi and Tigre was eventually paused so that Cachito the dog could be scooped up and handed in to local authorities, but two days later, he was in a local shelter after being hit by a car. This story has a happy ending, though: Tigre midfielder Raul Castro stepped in to adopt the dog.

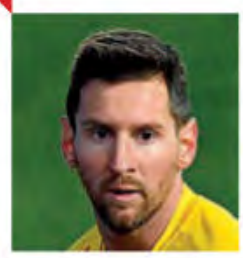
5 I'LL DRINK TO THAT

Lionel Messi's time at Barcelona may be running out, but at least he stuck around long enough to score his 644th goal for them, breaking Pele's record for goals at a single club. To mark the occasion, Budweiser went to the trouble of producing 644 individually-numbered bottles of beer, and sending them out to the 160 goalkeepers that Leo has scored past.

Big nights surely followed for Diego Alves and Gorka Iraizoz, who received 21 and 18 respectively, with Iker Casillas and Andres Fernandez taking 17 each.

"Thanks for the beers. I'll take it as a compliment," said Gianlugi Buffon of his two bottles, while Jan Oblak also congratulated the Barca star after cracking open ten bottles.

Cheers...Oblak opens up his beer



"It was a pleasure to share so much with you. Alejandro was a great person who left his mark on my career and whom I learnt a lot from"

Leo Messi pays tribute to his former Argentina coach Alejandro Sabella

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

Big Sam...another rescue mission

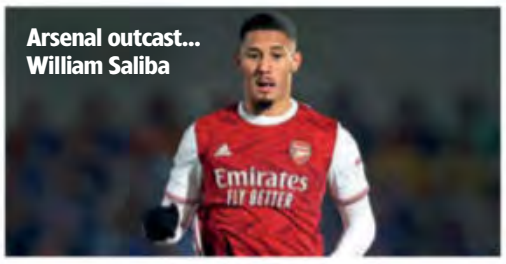
EUROPE

Paris Saint-Germain sacked Thomas Tuchel and replaced him with former Spurs boss **MAURICIO POCHETTINO**.

CHRISTIAN GROSS became Schalke's fourth coach this season following the short-lived reigns of Huub Stevens and Manuel Baum, who had replaced David Wagner. Elsewhere, **BO SVENSSON** took over at Mainz.

SAM ALLARDYCE was appointed West Bromwich Albion manager, replacing **SLAVEN BILIC**, who later joined Chinese side Beijing Guoan.

Nantes replaced Christian Gourcuff with former France coach **RAYMOND DOMENECH**, and Nice promoted **ADRIAN URSEA** from assistant coach following the departure of Patrick Vieira.



Arsenal outcast... William Saliba

Returning... Pochettino

STALE SOLBAKKEN was named Norway coach, replacing Lars Lagerback, after seven years at FC Copenhagen.

ETIENNE CAPOUE completed a £2 million move from Watford to Villarreal, while **JOAKIM MAEHLE** joined Atalanta from Genk for £9m.

WILLIAM SALIBA, **SEAD KOLASINAC** and **RADJA NAINGGOLAN** completed loans to Nice, Schalke and Cagliari.

MARIO BALOTELLI ended his search for a new club by joining Serie B's Monza.

CONCACAF

Mexican outfit America hired ex-Real Madrid coach **SANTIAGO SOLARI**.

In MLS, Atlanta United appointed **GABRIEL HEINZE** as their new coach.

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

Sacked...Favre

EUROPE

Borussia Dortmund parted company with head coach **LUCIEN FAVRE**.

In Spain, **DIEGO COSTA** was released by Atletico Madrid after falling out of favour at the club, while Athletic Bilbao fired boss **GAIZKA GARITANO**.

AZ Alkmaar sacked **ARNE SLOT** after speculation linking him with Feyenoord. The Dutchman later confirmed that he will replace **DICK ADVOCAAT** when he retires at the end of the season.

Cypriot champions APOEL sacked ex-Republic Of Ireland manager **MICK MCCARTHY** after just two months in charge of the Nicosia club.

CONCACAF

KYLE BECKERMAN, the MLS record appearance maker announced his retirement from playing.

ASIA

Coach **GIOVANNI VAN BRONCKHORST** left Guangzhou R&F after just one year in China.

Released... Diego Costa

OBITUARIES

World Cup hero...Rossi

PAOLO ROSSI (1956-2020)
In early December, Italian football mourned one of its most iconic figures when 1982 World Cup hero Paolo Rossi died at the age of 64, following a losing battle with lung cancer.

At an emotional funeral in Vicenza, many of his World Cup team-mates admitted that they had not even known he was terminally ill. Despite Rossi's legendary status, he was not one to make a fuss.

Rossi will be forever remembered for his role in that largely unexpected triumph in Spain. In one of the great World Cup stories, Italy coach Enzo Bearzot included the 26-year-old striker, despite the fact that he had only played three games in the previous two years, because of a bitterly contested (by him) two-year match-fixing ban.

Bearzot's gamble, however, paid off. After three poor opening round draws, Italy exploded into life in the second round when Rossi scored a hat-trick in an epic 3-2 defeat of tournament favourites Brazil.

Two more goals against Poland in the semi-final, and the first of Italy's three goals in the final against West Germany saw Rossi end up as the tournament's Golden Boot winner.

In the words of Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte, Rossi was the player "who realised a dream for an entire generation with his goals in the summer of 1982".
(Appreciation, page 28)

Paddy Agnew

"Loved that man to bits. He changed me as a person and as a player, and got Liverpool back to winning trophies. RIP Boss"

Jamie Carragher with a heartfelt message to the late Gerard Houllier

ALEJANDRO SABELLA (1954-2020)
Sabella was the mastermind behind Argentina coming within minutes of a penalty shoot-out against Germany in the 2014 World Cup final. Once the disappointment of Mario Gotze's late goal subsided, Sabella and his players returned home as heroes.

Sabella was already a legend in the city of La Plata. With a midfield marshalled by Juan Sebastian Veron, Sabella led Estudiantes to the 2009 Copa Libertadores, the club's fourth, before losing in the Club World Cup final to Barcelona thanks to a late Leo Messi goal. The showdown between European and South American sides is rarely so closely contested.

Sabella made his professional debut at River Plate as a classy playmaker in the 1970s, before becoming one of the first Argentines to play in England. Sheffield United had travelled to Argentina to sign Diego Maradona, but were put off by the price. Sabella joined instead, and played for the Blades and Leeds United.

Revered by his former players, news broke that Sabella had been rushed to hospital the day Argentines lined the streets to mourn Diego Maradona.

With the passing of both Maradona and Sabella, Argentines mourn two very different men who were largely responsible for the national team's greatest success – and joy – in recent decades.

Joel Richards

Beaten finalist... Sabella with his captain, Messi

GERARD HOULLIER (1947-2020)
In December, Jurgen Klopp received The Best FIFA Men's Coach award, yet his success at Liverpool may not have been possible without the man that had passed away just days before.

Gerard Houllier was the man that dragged Liverpool into the 21st century, modernising the club from its "boot room" past into a club capable of competing in Europe once again. As well as his work in turning the Melwood training ground into a state-of-the-art facility, Houllier played a key role role in developing the likes of Steven Gerrard, Jamie Carragher and Michael Owen. The trio were not the first players to owe their careers to Houllier; as France's technical director, he had already helped develop many of the 1998 World Cup-winning squad, including Thierry Henry and David Trezeguet.

His crowning achievement came in 2000-01, when Liverpool won the League Cup, FA Cup and UEFA Cup. He may have added a league title to his trophy haul the following season, were it not for a serious heart operation in October 2001. In spite of that, he still guided the Reds to second, with the help of assistant Phil Thompson. "Gerard Houllier was my mate," Thompson told *The Guardian*. "He is a massive part in the history of Liverpool Football Club. He leaves a great legacy."

Influential...Houllier salutes Steven Gerrard

TOMMY DOCHERTY (1928-2020)
Docherty crammed an awful lot into an incredible football career that lasted over 40 years.

Having started at Celtic, he spent the majority of his playing career at Preston North End, before moving south to join Arsenal and then Chelsea. His managerial career began at Stamford Bridge in 1961 and over the next six years he nurtured a number of Chelsea greats including Bobby Tambling, Peter Bonetti, Terry Venables, Peter Osgood and Ron Harris.

Later he took charge of Scotland, for whom he had won 25 caps and appeared at two World Cups as a player, but left just before qualification for the 1974 World Cup was secured to take charge of Manchester United. His time at Old Trafford was highly turbulent: the "Holy Trinity" of George Best, Bobby Charlton and Denis Law all departed under his watch, and the club was relegated. He took them back to the top flight as Second Division champions, but left shortly after winning the 1977 FA Cup.

The rest of his career featured spells at Derby County, QPR and his old club Preston, as well as Sydney Olympic and South Melbourne, before taking his notorious wit around the country as an after-dinner speaker.

JIM MCLEAN (1937-2020)
In stark contrast to Docherty, McLean spent his entire managerial career with just one club. Of all the managers to have taken charge of over 1,000 professional matches in European football, he is the only one of the post-war era to do it with one team: Dundee United.

Having worked as a coach at local rivals Dundee, McLean took the United job in November 1971, and remained in charge for 22 years. In 1983 he lifted the club's first, and only, top-flight league title, having won back-to-back League Cups in 1980 and 1981.

When Rangers tried to hire him in 1983 he turned them down, partly due to their policy of not signing Catholics, and partly out of loyalty to the squad that he'd built at Tannadice Park. Four years later he was almost rewarded with another trophy, as United reached the final of the UEFA Cup, yet were beaten over two legs by IFK Gothenburg.

COLIN BELL (1946-2021)
While Manchester City have achieved huge success in the last decade, none of their expensively-acquired stars have quite yet managed to surpass the "King of the Kippax" as the club's most revered player.

Signed from Bury aged 20 in 1966, Bell developed into one of the country's most complete midfielders over a 13-year career at City, scoring 153 goals in 501 games. Those figures would undoubtedly have been much higher if it wasn't for a knee injury that curtailed his career.

Nevertheless he was the star of the finest Manchester City side of the 20th century, winning a league title, one FA Cup, two League Cups and the European Cup Winners' Cup. With team-mates Mike Summerbee and Francis Lee, Bell formed a formidable attacking trio, both of whom were among the first to pay tribute.

"Colin was a huge star for Manchester City but you would never have known it," said Summerbee. "Kevin De Bruyne reminds me a lot of Colin in the way he plays and the way he is as a person."

"He was a very good player technically and had the ability to score goals," added Lee. "He goes into the top five City players of all time."

City legend... Colin Bell

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	14
Edouard Mendy (Chelsea)	5
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Milan)	4
David De Gea (Manchester United)	2
Ederson (Manchester City)	2
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	2
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	2
Andrea Consigli (Sassuolo)	1
Alex Remiro (Real Sociedad)	1
Koen Casteels (Wolfsburg)	1
David Marshall (Derby County)	1
Hugo Lloris (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Gianluigi Buffon (Juventus)	1
Antonio Adan (Sporting)	1
Alisson (Liverpool)	1

DEFENDERS

Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid)	14
Angelino (RB Leipzig)	10
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	9
Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid)	7
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	6
Achraf Hakimi (Internazionale)	5
Jose Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	5
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	5
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	5
Stefan Savic (Atletico Madrid)	5
Dayot Upamecano (RB Leipzig)	4
David Alaba (Bayern Munich)	4
Ben Chilwell (Chelsea)	4
Juan Cuadrado (Juventus)	4
Simon Kjaer (Milan)	4
Kieran Trippier (Atletico Madrid)	4
Kurt Zouma (Chelsea)	4
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	3
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	2
Joao Cancelo (Manchester City)	2
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	2
Danilo (Juventus)	2
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	2
Jose Fonte (Lille)	2
Reece James (Chelsea)	2
Thomas Meunier (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Sergio Reguilon (Tottenham Hotspur)	2
Alessio Romagnoli (Milan)	2
John Stones (Manchester City)	2
Lucas Vazquez (Real Madrid)	2
Francesco Acerbi (Lazio)	1
Toby Alderweireld (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Jordan Amavi (Marseille)	1
Dedryck Boyata (Hertha Berlin)	1
Cala (Cadiz)	1
Davide Calabria (Milan)	1
Sebastian Coates (Sporting)	1
Eric Dier (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Dodo (Shakhtar Donetsk)	1
Jean-Kevin Duverne (Brest)	1
Fabinho (Liverpool)	1
Faitout Maouassa (Rennes)	1
Felipe (Atletico Madrid)	1
Nicolas Gavory (Standard Liege)	1
Vincenzo Grifo (Freiburg)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich)	1
Michael Keane (Everton)	1
Joules Kounde (Sevilla)	1
Harry Maguire (Manchester United)	1
Chancel Mbemba (Porto)	1
Willi Orban (RB Leipzig)	1
Pepe (Porto)	1
Zaidu Sanusi (Porto)	1
Niklas Sule (Bayern Munich)	1
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	1
Raphael Varane (Real Madrid)	1
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	18
Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur)	14
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	9
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	8
Mikel Oyarzabal (Real Sociedad)	6
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	5
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	5
Casemiro (Real Madrid)	4
Mikel Merino (Real Sociedad)	4
Hakan Calhanoglu (Milan)	3
Franck Kessie (Milan)	3
Houssem Aouar (Lyon)	2
Toko Ekambi (Lyon)	2
Lars Stindl (Borussia Monchengladbach)	2
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	2
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	2
Thomas Muller (Bayern Munich)	2
Kingsley Coman (Bayern Munich)	2
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	2
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Tottenham Hotspur)	2
Max Kruse (Union Berlin)	2
James Rodriguez (Everton)	2
David Silva (Real Sociedad)	2
Angel Di Maria (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Benjamin Andre (Lille)	1
James Maddison (Leicester City)	1
Leon Bailey (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jonathan Bamba (Lille)	1
Ismael Bennacer (Milan)	1
Domenico Berardi (Sassuolo)	1
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	1
Papu Gomez (Atalanta)	1
Jack Grealish (Aston Villa)	1
N'Golo Kante (Chelsea)	1
Davy Klaassen (Ajax)	1
Koke (Atletico Madrid)	1
Manuel Locatelli (Sassuolo)	1
Sergej Milinkovic-Savic (Lazio)	1
Dani Olmo (RB Leipzig)	1
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	1
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Roma)	1
Mason Mount (Chelsea)	1
Leandro Paredes (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Yusuf Yazici (Lille)	1

FORWARDS

Robert Lewandowski (Bayern Munich)	30
Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Milan)	14
Erling Haaland (Borussia Dortmund)	11
Joao Felix (Atletico Madrid)	7
Romelu Lukaku (Internazionale)	7
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	6
Cristiano Ronaldo (Juventus)	6
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	5
Kylian Mbappe (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Lionel Messi (Barcelona)	3
Marcus Rashford (Manchester United)	2
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	2
Ciro Immobile (Lazio)	2
Jamie Vardy (Leicester City)	2
Burak Yilmaz (Lille)	2
Pote (Sporting)	1
Iago Aspas (Celta Vigo)	1
Anwar El Ghazi (Aston Villa)	1
Olivier Giroud (Chelsea)	1
Sadio Mane (Liverpool)	1
Dominic Calvert-Lewin (Everton)	1
Alvaro Morata (Juventus)	1
Kevin Volland (Monaco)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport Express* (Russia), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

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Mino Raiola

Agent to the superstars making headlines once again

He is arguably one of the most powerful men in world football, yet most fans would probably find it hard to identify him. His family were immigrants from southern Italy to Netherlands when he was a baby, yet nowadays he controls a global football players agency worth anything up to €50 million or more.

He is, of course, the 53-year-old "super" agent Mino Raiola, a man whose current book of megastar clients includes Paul Pogba, Gianluigi Donnarumma and Zlatan Ibrahimovic to name but three. The thing about Raiola, though, is that not everybody in the trade likes him.

For many, he is the embodiment of that modern trend which would have us believe that big transfer fees and financial considerations have eliminated the romantic heart of football. For others, he is a supremely capable agent who does a great job for his clients, no matter how many delicate feathers he has to ruffle.

One club that has come to know Raiola well, for better or for worse, is Manchester United. Right now, United fans must feel like they are looking at one of their old movies. In 2012, as agent to a very promising youth-team player, Paul Pogba, Raiola masterminded a free transfer for the then 18-year-old Frenchman to Italian cracks Juventus. Four years later, United bought Pogba back for £89 million.

Club manager at the time, the legendary Sir Alex Ferguson, felt that Raiola had "robbed" United of their talented youngster. Subsequently, he made no secret of his poor opinion of Raiola, writing in a 2015 book: "There are one or two football agents I simply do not like and Mino Raiola, Paul Pogba's agent, is one of them. I distrusted him from the moment I met him."

Right now, however, it looks like it is happening again. Current United manager, Norwegian Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, was distinctly unimpressed when Raiola told Turin-based sports daily, *TuttoSport*, that Pogba was unhappy at United, implying furthermore that he might return to Juventus at the end of the season.

Agent...Raiola and Ibrahimovic at the 2018 World Cup

Worse still, these comments were made on the eve of United's vital, last day Champions League group clash with German club RB Leipzig, a game they lost 3-2 to crash out of the competition. Solskjaer commented bitterly the next day that "Paul's agent" should "realise that this is a team sport and that we work together".

> "There are one or two football agents I simply do not like and Mino Raiola, Paul Pogba's agent, is one of them. I distrusted him from the moment I met him"
>
> **Sir Alex Ferguson**

"The guy should never be dealt with again by this football club," said former Red Devils captain Gary Neville on Sky Sports. "They can't go and sign another player with that agent. They cannot do that – enough is enough."

Will we see a repeat of 2012? Not necessarily. There is no doubt that Pogba was highly valued by the club during his Juventus years (2012-2016). Yet Turin sources suggest that, in these COVID times, both the asking price (between €55m and €75m) and Pogba's current annual salary of £15 million present problems.

That salary, for instance, is more than double that of Juventus stars such as vice-captain Leonardo Bonucci (€6.5m), Argentine Paulo Dybala (€7.3m) or Brazilian Arthur (€5m). In short, Pogba would almost certainly have to take a wage cut at Juventus. Furthermore, Juventus, a club renowned for its shrewd husbandry, would probably want to first offload a big name such as Dybala or even, heaven forbid, Cristiano Ronaldo before they could contemplate a "heavy" deal like that involving Pogba.

Heavy deals, however, and multinationals are not matters that worry Mino Raiola. When Zlatan

Returning...Raiola has spoken out about Pogba returning to Juventus

Ibrahimovic in November asked in a tweet who had given Electronic Arts the permission to use his name and face in EA Sports' hugely popular video game, FIFA 21, Raiola soon waded into the burgeoning and complex argument with a threat of legal action.

Classic Raiola: never one to be over impressed by big names or big tasks. From a tough, hardworking, family-oriented southern Italian background (his restaurant owning, Dutch immigrant father used to work 18-hour days), Raiola, like him or not, has got to where he is on the basis of hard work and sheer "nous". Everyone agrees that he does a great job for his players, who he tends to see as "family".

His attention to detail, to his players' every minor practical or psychological need and above all his ability to cut a good deal means that a Who's Who of world-class players have passed through his stable (and his bank account). Raiola also "knows" football. He has worked in football since his teenage years with HFC Haarlem, the city to which his family emigrated.

As early as 1988, he was involved in the transfer of Frank Rijkaard from Sporting to Milan. Today his clients include not just Ibrahimovic and Pogba but also Armenian Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Roma), Belgian Romelu Lukaku (Inter), Dutchman Matthijs de Ligt (Juventus), Norwegian Erling Haaland (Borussia Dortmund) and Italian Moise Kean (Paris Saint-Germain).

Each time, one of those players has moved clubs, Raiola has made money, sometimes a lot of money. For example, he is believed to have earned a cool €20m from Pogba's 2016 move from Juventus to Manchester United. When, not long afterwards, he bought a Miami villa once owned by infamous Mafioso, Al Capone, critics commented that he could afford it. After all, according to *Forbes*, his sports agency stable, limited to 70 or so "upmarket items", last year returned a $700m turnover in negotiated deals.

Raiola may not be liked by everyone in the trade but there is no denying he is good at what he does and that he owes his success to his own unique talents – as well, of course, to those of his players.

Paddy Agnew

Yunus Musah

Highly-rated Valencia midfielder sparks international tug-of-war

In November 2020, England youth international Yunus Musah made his senior international debut, aged just 17. But not for England.

The Valencia teenager turned out for the United States against Wales in Swansea, immediately forming a promising partnership with Juventus' 22-year-old Weston McKennie in midfield.

Joined by 21-year-old Tyler Adams of RB Leipzig, the trio looked every bit the future of the USA engine room in a 0-0 draw, and did so again in a subsequent 6-2 win against Panama.

As these were friendlies, Musah is not tied to the USA just yet. He was born in New York to Ghanaian parents, lived in Italy for ten years, then moved to England in 2012 where he played for Arsenal's academy. This gives him a number of options at international level, and while the USA have got in first, England are still keen.

Musah's residence in London and appearances for Arsenal's youth teams meant England was the convenient choice to further his development at youth international level.

After leaving Arsenal for a clearer path to first-team football, he joined Valencia, initially playing for their B team but soon impressing enough to break into the senior squad. On making his senior debut against Levante at the start of the season, Musah became the youngest foreign player to appear for the club. His goal against Getafe at the age of 17 years and 338 days saw him become the second-youngest goalscorer in the club's history.

Musah has operated on either wing in Javi Gracia's 4-4-2, but played a number of positions throughout his youth career. His inventive touch, accomplished technique, speed and willingness to take players on make him the ideal modern midfielder.

Those senior club appearances on the flanks for his club make his transition back to midfield for the USA, and his assertive, polished performance against Wales, all the more impressive. He certainly didn't look like a 17-year-old making his international debut.

USMNT general manager Brian McBride, along with sporting director Earnie Stewart, play a key role in bringing players with dual nationality into the USA camp. So far, they have convinced the likes of Gio Reyna and Sergino Dest to turn out for the USA, and hope to do the same with Musah.

England are similarly committed to attracting players, with a department at St. George's Park – known as the Player Insights team – tasked with tracking and analysing players that qualify for the Three Lions. Indeed, the Sunderland-born Reyna was one such target, but ultimately lost to the USA.

The FA are keen to avoid a repeat and haven't given up on Musah, with Under-21 manager Aidy Boothroyd having spoken to the player's family. Yet the USA are building one of the most exciting player pools in their history, and the opportunity to be a part of that ahead of a home World Cup in 2026 may be too good to turn down.

At club level, Musah has committed to Valencia, signing a new contract until 2026, which contains a £90 million release clause. The official video that announced the deal may offer a clue as to where his international future lies: "My story begins in the Bronx, New York," it begins. "As a child, I had the opportunity to travel to England...it isn't easy to leave home, and it's even tougher to move so far away. A new way of life, a new home, rainy, cold afternoons on muddy pitches." Hardly a ringing endorsement of the country he played 32 youth games for.

James Nalton

Debutant...Musah played 79 minutes against Wales

Carlos Quieroz

The experienced Portuguese coach has been sacked by Colombia

Within just five days, the whole project was up in smoke. Two heavy World Cup qualifying defeats and the game was up for Colombia coach Carlos Queiroz. First in Barranquilla and a worst-ever home defeat in the sweaty Caribbean port saw *Los Cafeteros* crash 3-0 to Uruguay. "I take full responsibility," lamented Portuguese coach Queiroz. "But the most important thing is to put the game behind us and focus on Ecuador." In the dressing room the sparks were already flying. That was Friday the 13th. But the nightmare had only just begun.

Nobody imagined a game in the Andean-hilltop capital of Quito was ever going to be easy. Ecuador were flying high in the qualifiers under new coach Gustavo Alfaro and boasted an enviable exhibition of youth talent. Nevertheless, the Ecuador starting XI against Colombia still contained just one European-based player. A point in Quito was the objective. It would have at least steadied the ship.

Yet within eight minutes Colombia were two goals down. Before half-time and trailing 4-1, Queiroz had already made four subs. By full-time the Colombian commentary team was silent, dumbfounded as they wrestled to digest the 6-1 final scoreline. Queiroz's time was up. The humiliation was too much. This was Colombia's worst defeat since 1977. "Shameful," howled the front page of the following day's *El Tiempo* newspaper.

It didn't take long for rumours to spill of a changing-room bust-up. Post-Uruguay fists were allegedly raised, one player supposedly lifted from the floor by his throat. Team star James Rodriguez was forced into releasing a statement rejecting the "disinformation of these slanderous" reports. No apology was included for his part in the most ignominious week for Colombian football in decades.

Two weeks later, Queiroz was gone. Halfway through a contract that ran up until the 2022 World Cup, he departed stage left. "When saying goodbye isn't easy, it means we only have reason to proudly express our immense gratitude," the Mozambique-born coach posted on Instagram. "Onwards Colombia!"

Ever since his unveiling as Jose Pekerman's replacement in February 2019, Sir Alex Ferguson's former assistant had found it tough to convince fans his modern European style could assimilate Colombian idiosyncrasies. Antagonising these concerns was his refusal to consider a No.10 in his favoured 4-3-3. "Our players play in Europe but they're not European," Colombian idol Carlos Valderrama moaned. "We're South American. That's why they [European clubs] buy us, not because we run a lot and fight hard."

Sacked...Quieroz looks on during Colombia's 6-1 defeat in Ecuador

Queiroz had, however, made efforts to win over the press. He attended Colombian league games, invited cherry-picked journalists over to the federation offices where he worked and slept, and began a series of training camps involving local players.

> Carlos Queiroz's time was up. The humiliation was too much. This was Colombia's worst defeat since 1977

It was a deliberate departure from the reign of the hermit Pekerman.

Results too had been solid if not spectacular. Eliminated on penalties in the quarter-finals at the 2019 Copa America by Chile, Colombia went home without conceding a goal. "It doesn't matter if my style is rock 'n' roll or samba, I just want to win," Queiroz boasted.

But amid the resolute displays expected from one of the world's greatest defensive coaches, it was clear Colombia had lost their swing. Teams began to work out how to shut down Queiroz's circuits of play. If plan A failed to ignite, then against better sides Colombia quickly found themselves in trouble.

After dispatching a shambolic

Strained...Quieroz failed to get the best out of James Rodriguez in a 4-3-3 formation

Venezuela 3-0 in their opening CONMEBOL qualifier, Colombia then met Chile in Santiago. A blistering start was suddenly grounded when right-back Stefan Medina limped out of the game. Colombia crumbled, falling behind 2-1 and only scraping a point at the death.

Behind the scenes, some players were reportedly beginning to grumble about the special treatment afforded to James Rodriguez while everyone else was expected to sacrifice for the cause. As key players were mystifyingly dropped and others asked to play out of position, Queiroz's team selection became increasingly discombobulated.

Queiroz had done himself no favours by suggesting he'd have no problem picking Boca Juniors winger Sebastian Villa – currently being investigated for domestic abuse – for the national team. "If every man who receives a punch from a woman went to the press, the world would be screwed," Queiroz unwittingly bleated into an open microphone.

In the end though, Colombia's spectacular collapse left his position untenable. Slumped in seventh position, the federation opted for a reset despite the absence of a plan B. "We're starting from scratch," federation president Ramon Jesurun admitted. "But ideally it will be a Colombian coach."

Pekerman was initially courted, while former Mexico coach Juan Carlos Osorio would have been a strong shout had it not been for a disastrous recent spell that resulted in his sacking at Atletico Nacional. Hernan Dario Gomez, who took Colombia to the 1998 World Cup, was also fancied by the federation, but is fiercely unpopular with almost everyone else.

The most unifying candidate remains Reinaldo Rueda, most recently Chile coach, who led Atletico Nacional to the 2016 Copa Libertadores. It remains to be seen whether an agreement can be reached for his release. Yet whoever succeeds Queiroz will have their work cut out. When the South American qualifiers resume in March, the new coach will face the ultimate baptism of fire – at home to table-topping Brazil.

Carl Worswick

Hulk

The Brazilian leaves the Chinese Super League after four and a half years in China

There have been plenty of famous foreign players heading to China in recent years. Some – such as Carlos Tevez – failed spectacularly, but there have been major successes. After four and a half largely excellent years, Hulk will be missed, despite something of a sour ending.

The Brazilian arrived at Shanghai SIPG from Zenit Saint Petersburg in the summer of 2016 when the Chinese Super League spending spree was at its height. The fee was a reported £46 million, then the most ever paid by an Asian club, though Shanghai would pay even more to Chelsea to bring in Oscar a few months later.

Shanghai were not one of the traditional powers of Chinese football, but SIPG (Shanghai International Port Group) took over in 2015 and took things to a whole new level.

Hulk helped Shanghai reach the quarter-finals of the 2016 AFC Champions League in the club's first appearance. The following year, the Brazilian scored 17 goals as the Reds finished as Chinese Super League runners-up. Perhaps even more impressive were the 12 assists, second only to Argentina's Ezequiel Lavezzi.

Fans' favourite...Hulk was a big hit with the SIPG supporters

Shanghai hero... Hulk in action during the AFC Champions League in November

In 2018, Hulk starred again with 13 goals and 12 assists (a rare achievement called a "double-double" in China), linking up with Oscar and the best Chinese player Wu Lei, the league's top scorer with 27. This trio made SIPG an irresistible attacking force and it produced a first championship title.

It wasn't just about the quantity but the quality of some spectacular strikes. Hulk, powerful and aggressive, made Shanghai feared while fans loved him – the average attendance at the club went from 12,000 in 2014 to 30,000 three years later. He was active on Chinese social media and for all his skills, perhaps his most important achievement was a basic one – giving 100 per cent in every game, something that not all imports to Asia manage.

That commitment was questioned at the end, though. All knew Hulk would be out of contract at the end of 2020 and, at the age of 34, ready to leave China especially after a tough league season in which all players had been confined to hotel rooms for months. Shanghai boss Vitor Pereira, suggested that not all in the team were pulling their weight and it became apparent that he meant, primarily, Hulk.

Shanghai, despite adding Marko Arnautovic and Aaron Mooy from West Ham United and Brighton and Hove Albion respectively, struggled to a fourth-place finish in the league and then headed to Qatar to play the AFC Champions League in November.

The team got out of the group, a feat almost overshadowed by Hulk seeming to give the boss a mouthful before storming off down the tunnel after being substituted in a 2-1 defeat to Yokohama F. Marinos of Japan. He was left out of the team for the next three games as Shanghai were eliminated. "I want the players with the right spirit to play," said Pereira when asked about Hulk. "This is my decision [not to play him] and that is why he is not here."

It was a sad ending but Hulk will always be fondly remembered in Shanghai.

John Duerden

Real Sociedad

The Basque outfit from San Sebastian are flying high in La Liga

With a third of the season played, Real Sociedad had proven to be a force to be reckoned with. Their flying start gave them 26 points from their first 14 matches, including seven wins. They were also La Liga's top scorers with a tally of 24 goals, scoring more than three goals in five different games.

Their strong defensive backline was even more impressive, conceding just eight goals, with the rock-solid Atletico Madrid the only team with a better defensive record. Their best results included a 0-0 draw with champions Real Madrid and a 3-0 win at Real Betis.

The coach behind it is Imanol Aguacil, who mainly utilises a rigid and well-drilled 4-1-4-1 or 4-2-3-1 formation. Their early-season success had been underpinned by last season's sixth-placed finish, when solidity was mixed with creative genius: the Scandinavian duo of Alexander Isak and Martin Odegaard propelling the San Sebastian side to Europa League football and the Copa del Rey final against Basque arch-rivals Athletic Bilbao (a game which is scheduled to take place in April, hopefully in front of a full stadium).

As the Norwegian returned to Real Madrid, Real Sociedad found a ready-made replacement in the magician that is David Silva. After a decade of success at Manchester City, the midfielder from Las Palmas returned to Spanish shores. It represented a notable coup for the club, with early signs suggesting he still has the vision, elegance and defence-splitting passes to give his team another dimension, albeit without 100 per cent fitness.

Silva's style fits perfectly into the team's ethos of patiently building from the back, taking as many touches as desired to arrive in the final third of the pitch. They pick and choose their moments to cut through an opponent. Sometimes they overdo it, but they remain loyal to their cultured philosophy.

So far, it is an approach that has reaped rewards. Patience is the virtue that had guided them to the top of the table. And deservedly so.

David Silva is naturally the standout figure, yet this is no one-man team. Spanish international Mikel Oyarzabal has been a consistent performer for many a year. Now, he has reached new heights as the team's top scorer with seven goals in his first 11 La Liga games. His ability on the left wing and as a striker make him their principal danger man, combining great crossing ability with a goalscorer's instinct. When he is on form, so is the team.

The winger has taken on the primary goalscoring responsibility, although the strikers Isak and Willian Jose continue to be a handful for opposition defenders. On the right is Cristian Portu, a very skilful and classy performer on his day, as is Adnan Januzaj, who has improved notably into a more mature and well-rounded figure since his time with Manchester United.

While the forwards' numbers are eye-catching, one of the team's standout performers goes under the radar. Mikel Merino is the side's midfield general and in many ways is an underrated figure of Spanish football. He had a difficult spell in the Premier League, unable to settle on Tyneside with Newcastle United. Yet, his return to La Liga has rejuvenated his career and he's been a consistent performer in his three years with the club.

Real Sociedad are a team that have gradually grown in recent seasons. They have matured into a well-polished and entertaining side, possessing a mixture of defensive solidity and attacking flair.

That blend of steel and silk will concern Manchester United, their opponents in the second round of the Europa League. The draw offers echoes of 2011-12, when the Red Devils also travelled to the Basque Country after being eliminated from the Champions League group stages. Then it was Marcelo Bielsa's Athletic Bilbao cast as the exciting upstarts, defeating Alex Ferguson's side both home and away to seal a 5-3 aggregate victory.

Athletic went on to reach the Europa League final that season, and if Real Sociedad can spring a similar surprise at Old Trafford, they will believe that they have the momentum to mount a similar campaign.

David Whitworth

Key man...Mikel Oyarzabal has been on fire this season

> **Oyarzabal has been a consistent performer for many a year. Now, he has reached new heights**

Magician... David Silva

Carlos Tevez

Boca Juniors striker to enter club politics when he retires in 2021

Rumours of Carlos Tevez's imminent retirement broke late last November, leading "*El Apache*" to immediately deny the reports, confirming he was staying at Boca Juniors. "When I take a decision about my future you'll be the first to know!" he cheerily told supporters on Instagram.

Tevez's contract with Boca ends later this year. He turns 37 in February, an age at which many players would be considering calling time. And yet, over 19 years since his debut for the club, Tevez signed off last year with some of the best form of his career.

He scored six goals in the last seven games of the 2019-20 league campaign to help Boca pip arch-rivals River Plate to the title on the final day last March. It was Tevez's goal that secured the title, at home to Diego Maradona's Gimnasia.

Perhaps the low number of games over the course of the year, due to the pandemic, benefitted senior players like Tevez. When the Copa Libertadores resumed in September, he was mobile and sharp, employed behind a main striker. With his brace against Caracas in the group stage, he joined Martin Palermo and Juan Roman Riquelme on the podium of Boca's all-time top scorers in the competition. His goal against Internacional in the last 16 provided the opportunity for him – and Boca – to pay tribute to Maradona, unveiling one of *El Diez's* Boca shirts beneath his own.

Political rivals... Tevez and Riquelme were team-mates at the 2006 World Cup

Aged 36, Tevez was Boca's top goalscorer in the calendar year. The club's recognised strikers like Franco Soldano and Ramon Abila were misfiring, meaning coach Miguel Angel Russo was looking to Tevez, as well as 30-year-old Eduardo Salvio, to score. And while Boca's supporters have warmed to Salvio, Tevez is the last of the club's *idolos* still playing.

> Tevez enjoys cult status at Boca, arguably shared with only the likes of Riquelme and Maradona

Every December, Boca dust off the club's photo album to pore over the memories and anniversaries from the early 2000s' unprecedented success on the South American and international stage. Winning three Copa Libertadores titles in four years, Boca ratified their 2000 Intercontinental Cup win over Real Madrid with a defeat of the Milan of Maldini, Pirlo, Kaka and Shevchenko three years later for the same trophy.

Tevez made his debut in between those two trophies, touted as one of the most exciting young talents in world football. He was South America's Player of the Year in 2003 and 2004, and again in 2005 after joining Corinthians. His success in Europe, in particular at the Manchester clubs and Juventus, only added to his legend. When he returned to Argentina in 2015, over 60,000 supporters packed out the Bombonera for his presentation.

Tevez enjoys cult status at Boca, arguably shared with only the likes of Riquelme and Maradona. Yet the question remains over how much longer he will play. And then there is another bigger question – what comes next?

The rumours of his retirement included versions to the effect that he would move into club politics under the former president Daniel Angelici, who lost the 2019 club elections after failing to come good on his promise of major silverware.

It is unclear what sort of capacity Tevez would occupy. He does have the experience of his contemporaries to consider. Diego Milito recently stepped down as football director at Racing over differences of opinion with the president, while Juan Sebastian Veron has been a successful president of Estudiantes since 2004. Closer to home, Riquelme is Boca's vice-president, naturally overseeing the football department.

Tevez is expected to continue playing while Boca challenge for a record-equalling seventh Copa Libertadores crown (at the time of writing, Boca had progessed to the semi-finals). But here is the rub. Any success and silverware would further empower the board of directors who he may then run against in future club elections.

Joel Richards

Fans' favourite...Tevez celebrates with Boca supporters in March

Tribute...Tevez celebrates with Maradona after his title-winning goal

ITALY

Italy mourns a World Cup legend

Paddy Agnew pays tribute to Paolo Rossi

As football icons go, Paolo Rossi always came across as an approachable guy. Rossi, who died in early December at the age of 64 after a losing battle with lung cancer, was a living legend, a national hero, one of the most celebrated of Italians, but he dealt with all that very lightly.

I moved to Italy in the winter of 1985, three years after his moment of crowning glory in the summer of 1982, when his six goals power-blasted Italy to an unexpected World Cup win in Spain. Even at the distance of three years, the echoes of that triumph were palpable, be it through TV ads featuring the heroes of 1982 or through well founded sports media concern that there would be no repeat show at the following year's 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

A four-year-old child could have worked out that many Italians still felt excited by and proud of that victory, Italy's first World Cup triumph since the far-off days of the Mussolini-Pozzo team in 1934 and 1938. By the time I arrived in Italy, however, Rossi's career was clearly on a downward spiral during his difficult (and only) season with Milan. He had missed the first ten games of the season through injury and he ended up scoring just two Serie A goals, admittedly both in a 2-2 derby draw with Internazionale.

Looking at his goals now, people might be inclined to dismiss him as a "poacher". Yet, he was much more than that. He was a player whose speed of mind and foot, whose footballing intelligence more than compensated for his lack of weight and muscle.

He was no big central target man, no Gigi Riva. A more apt comparison would be Muhammad Ali: he would float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. One of the adjectives most often used about Rossi during the many tributes paid to him by colleagues was that he was "light". He had a "light touch" on and off the field. Milan great, Paolo Maldini, whose career was just beginning as Rossi's ended in 1987, put it this way: "For me, Paolo was so many things. He was the hero of 1982, a World Cup in which my father was part of the Italian coaching staff. For all Italians, he was a legend...I will always recall him for his light touch. He was a superstar but at the same time an absolutely normal person."

Legend...Rossi was inducted into Italian football's Hall of Fame in January 2017

When I met up with Rossi in the summer of 1997, ten years after he had retired from football, I experienced that "absolutely normal person" for myself. I had been fortunate enough to be hired as an interpreter for a six-part BBC documentary, *Golden Boots*, presented by Gary Lineker. This was a history of the World Cup that focused on the leading goalscorers at various tournaments.

Interviews had been set up with a cast of living legends, including the 1982 coach Enzo Bearzot, ex-Inter and Italy midfielder Sandro Mazzola

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Winner...Rossi lifts the 1982 World Cup trophy after scoring in the final

and, of course, Paolo Rossi. Without exception, they were all delighted to meet Lineker and exchange stories with him.

Rossi spoke no English and Lineker no Italian, but they struck up an almost immediate empathy and understanding. Two leading goalscorers in consecutive World Cups – Rossi in '82 and Lineker in '86 – they needed no introduction to one another. Half the time, in my role as official interpreter, I was rendered redundant because they immediately got the other's drift.

That interview took place in Vicenza where Rossi's career had really kicked off in the 1977-78 season when, as a young player on loan from Juventus, he scored 24 goals for the newly-promoted side, in the process attracting the attention of Italy coach, Bearzot. Hence, when he retired from football, he settled in Vicenza where he became successfully involved in the real estate business.

That day, he admitted that he was earning more money as a real estate dealer than he had earned as a footballer. He might have been exaggerating a little, but this was a different time – before the Internet, mobile phones, satellite TV, VAR, the Champions League or the Premier League. This was a time when, even after winning the World Cup, Rossi and his wife could walk around Turin, exchanging banter with fans. Today, he would probably be accompanied by a bodyguard, and travel around in a limousine with dark tinted windows.

Not knowing Vicenza, I rang Rossi as we drove up to the city, both to confirm that we were on the way and to ask where we should meet. By that stage of his life, Rossi had done a lot of interviews, so he immediately suggested we meet up at the Santuario della Madonna di Monte Berico, a splendid baroque Basilica which sits high on a hill overlooking the city. He knew only too well that it would make for good TV images.

Reunion...Lineker and Rossi met again in Russia during the 2018 World Cup

When the news of Rossi's death was announced, Lineker said on social media: "How terribly sad. A wonderful striker and a lovely man. Scored a World Cup hat-trick in one of the greatest games of all time against Brazil. A true finisher's life has finished way too soon."

Just like his life, Rossi's career was also curtailed prematurely by injury. I recall talking to the late Ray Wilkins, then a Milan player, back in the autumn of 1986. He had just played alongside

Clash...Rossi holds off Paul Breitner during the 1982 World Cup final

Rossi for a season. When I asked him about the legend of Italian football, he shook his head ruefully, saying that Paolo was "a fantastic guy" but "he has got serious injury problems".

Indeed he had, retiring from football less than a year later in 1987 at the age of just 31. Of average height and slender build, Rossi was arguably not built for the intense wear and tear of football. He had joined Juventus as a 16-year-old, having been spotted in the Florence youth club, Cattolica Virtus.

Ironically, the man who spotted him was Luciano Moggi, then working in the Juventus youth-team set-up but later to become the villain of the piece in the infamous "*Calciopoli*" match-fixing scandal of 2006. Like many great champions, Rossi's early career was not easy. By the age of 19, he had already had three cartilages removed from his knees. In the end, as Ray Wilkins pointed out, that physical frailty curtailed his career.

Indeed, Rossi himself often pointed out that his professional career really only lasted seven seasons. Not only was it curtailed by injury but, of course, he also lost two years, between the ages of 24 and 26, to that infamous ban for alleged involvement in the 1980 "*Totonero*" match-fixing scandal that led to the arrest of 13 players and the relegation to Serie B of both Milan and Lazio.

As in many epic dramas, however, the nightmare had a happy ending

At the time, Rossi was a Perugia player, on loan from Vicenza having left Juventus in a then world-record deal which valued him at around €2.5 million. His alleged crime related to a 2-2 Serie A away draw with Avellino, in which he had scored both goals. To his dying day, Rossi claimed his total innocence, saying that his only crime had been to chat for 50 seconds with "some guy" presented to him by a team-mate the day before the game.

"Some guy" had suggested that Avellino were open to the idea of a draw. Next day, Rossi told his Perugia team-mates about the incident and they all dismissed it, vowing to play to win, he always claimed. On the basis of the "50 second chat", the football federation judges gave him a three-year ban, subsequently reduced to two years. Years later, he still insisted: "I lost two years of my career, from 24-26, for something I didn't do. For a 50 second conversation."

As in many epic dramas, however, the nightmare had a happy ending.

National coach Bearzot had already taken a big gamble on Rossi by taking him to the World Cup in 1978. Despite the fact that he had only two previous caps, Rossi was a key man in Italy's attack, and rewarded the faith shown in him with three goals in Argentina, earning the Silver Ball in the process, and helping to make Italy a seriously good side in their fourth-placed finish. The myth of *Pablito* was born.

If Bearzot's first gamble was big, the second one was monumental. Four years later, he insisted on making Rossi an automatic first choice in attack in Spain, despite the fact that he had only played three games in two years because of his suspension. The rest, of course, is much loved history.

Rossi's death, coming just days after that of Diego Maradona, clearly marks the passing of an era. Even though he won league titles, the Coppa Italia, a Cup Winners' Cup and a European Cup with Juventus, his name will forever be associated with *La Nazionale* and Spain '82. He was the handsome lad who, for a few months one summer, took an entire country by the hand and led it out to dance in the streets.

Rest in peace, Paolo Rossi, one of nature's gentlemen.

Remembered...fans lined the streets of Vicenza in tribute

eye witness

Mark Gleeson reports

EGYPT

The African super-club

Al Ahly have overcome extreme adversity to become champions of Africa once again. Now they're setting their sights on bigger things

Ordinarily, the forces buffeting up against Al Ahly would have buckled any club. But the Egyptians have shown remarkable resilience in reclaiming their position as Africa's most successful club.

For almost ten years, the Cairo giants have had to deal with

African champs... Al Ahly celebrate victory over arch-rivals Zamalek

extraordinary socio-political and economic circumstances, and yet finished the decade back at the top after claiming the African Champions League in November.

They now hope to take that further forward in February, as they compete at the Club World Cup for the sixth time, hoping to make an impact on the tournament in Qatar.

The repression that has followed the Arab Spring in Egypt, the 2012 Port Said Stadium disaster, the suspension of domestic football, banning of spectators and the subsequent economic blows should have had them on their knees, but instead Al Ahly completed a triple triumph at the end of 2020 – with domestic league and cup success followed by their first Champions League title in seven years, stretching their record number of titles to nine.

Egypt has been both volatile and vulnerable since the Arab Spring, the social revolution that broke out in late 2010 and, for a short while, promised radical change across the Arabic-speaking world.

Its genesis was in Tunisia but its height was in Tahrir Square, Cairo, where the daily demonstrations eventually toppled the long-standing military regime of Hosni Mubarak and lifted the 31-year-old state of emergency.

They were led by Al Ahly's ultras, who, in the absence of any formal opposition, transferred their organisational ability from the terraces to the political arena and for several heady months looked to be steering Egypt to a democratic future.

But as Egypt embarked on its new elections, so the old security order extracted a bloody revenge.

In early 2012, rival fans of Al Masry set upon Al Ahly supporters in the Port Said Stadium as the police and army turned a blind eye. 74 people were killed, some thrown from the top of the stands, and over 500 injured.

It had a deep impact on the team at the time, precipitating the retirement of talisman Mohamed Aboutrika and the return to Portugal of coach Manuel Jose, architect of the dominance in Egyptian and African competition over the previous ten years.

The massacre led to the immediate suspension of the domestic competition in Egypt, although Al Ahly kept playing in the Champions League and remarkably, without any local competition to sustain them, won the 2013 edition.

Two seasons of the Egyptian Premier League were ultimately lost and Al Ahly did feel the pinch. Losing to their namesakes from Benghazi in neighbouring Libya in the early stages of the 2014 Champions League was a low point.

The long-term impact of the Port Said massacre was to close stadiums in Egypt to spectators – a situation that continues to this day.

LEFT: Empty seats... fans were banned from the Champions League final

BELOW: Verdict... Al Ahly supporters celebrate after Al Masry fans are sentenced for their role in the Port Said Stadium riots

There have been exceptions here and there when wary authorities have allowed crowds in, when it has been in the best interests of the Egyptian national team or the Egyptian clubs playing in continental club competition to have a rowdy crowd behind them.

World Cup qualifiers, crucial Champions League games and the hosting of the Africa Cup of Nations – a failed effort to paint a situation of normality – have seen spectators allowed back but now with the COVID-19 pandemic, they are firmly closed again.

The shutout over the last eight years has cost Al Ahly millions in lost revenue, as keeping the ultras from organising on the terraces remains a priority for the military regime, whose grip on power is now firmer and more Draconian than ever.

But Al Ahly's record is a lesson in hardiness. They have kept up a constant presence in the Champions League, shrugging off all the adversity while still remaining the dominant domestic force.

They were Champions League runners-up to Wydad Casablanca in 2017 and losing finalists again 12 months later when they let slip a 3-1 lead from the first leg against Esperance of Tunisia, losing 4-3 on aggregate.

It all finally came together again in November against arch-rivals Zamalek in the delayed 2020 final.

"The Champions League title is very precious for the team because we haven't won it since 2013," said influential veteran midfielder Walid Soliman. "This generation realised an historic achievement and gained a great dose of confidence that will help them in the coming ten years.

"It's so difficult for Ahly to lose titles. We have motivation that sets us apart from the other teams," he added.

The club has kept its prominent place in Cairo society, even despite the actions of its supporters. They, however have to be differentiated from the club's members, numbering around 150,000, who enjoy access to a sprawling country club on chic Zamalek island, with impressive grounds, a mini stadium and offering 24 different sports.

It is led by Mahmoud Al Khatib, among the legends of the game in Egypt, who challenged incumbent Mahmud Taher for the club presidency back in 2017.

Taher had a good image as a solid businessman and the steady hand on the rudder, but Al Khatib's star appeal was too strong a lure for the electorate.

Fee-paying members vote for the club's administration and have kept Al Ahly on a remarkably even keel with a stable board and conservative approach that has little of the knee-jerk actions so prevalent in the Arabic-speaking sports world.

Match-winner... Al Ahly's Magdy Afsha celebrates his winning goal against Zamalek

But they still shred through coaches with the likes of Juan Carlos Garrido, Jose Peseiro, Martin Jol, Patrice Carteron, Martin Lasarte and Rene Weiler having come and gone, none lasting more than a year.

> "Ahly are not a club who set targets. They have to win everything in front of them"
>
> **Egyptian TV analyst Amr Shaheen**

Swiss-born Weiler, formerly at the helm of Nurnberg in the Bundesliga and Anderlecht in Belgium, laid the foundation for the 2020 success, but left during last year's lockdown.

"Ahly are a club that needs to feel total commitment from its coaches. Weiler had his family back in Switzerland and wasn't sure about staying and as soon as there was that hesitation, they were happy to let him go," explains prominent Egyptian TV analyst Amr Shaheen.

"Ahly are not a club who set targets. They have to win everything in front of them," he adds.

New coach Pitso Mosimane seconds this: "They have the right attitude for the game, they go for it."

He was a surprise appointment from South Africa, where he admits he was often bemused in his home country by a laissez-faire attitude from some players. "There were some games where we'd ask ourselves, 'what happened to the team today, why are you not committed'. You won't find that here in Egypt – the culture and mentality is on another level. They go for it and they bash each other...they are big boys here."

Al Ahly's Champions League success means they compete in the Club World Cup in Qatar, looking for a much-improved performance on past flops.

While the likes of Moroccan giants Raja Casablanca and DR Congo's TP Mazembe have finished runners-up in major breakthroughs for the African game, Al Ahly have disappointed, notably suffering embarrassing loses to Al Ittihad of Saudi Arabia in 2005 and Adelaide United in 2008, even though they have been to the competition considerably more times than any other African side.

Having weathered all the difficulties of the last decade at home, there is a sense it is now time for the club to elevate their profile at events like the Club World Cup and match the South American and European opposition.

"They want to win everything," adds Mosimane. "When I came they said you must win the Champions League. Then it is, 'no, you must win the Egyptian Cup'. Then the CAF Super Cup. Then the Club World Cup. You always have to do more, it is never enough."

Club World Cup...Al Ahly were beaten 5-1 by Monterrey in their last appearance in the competition in 2013

eye witness

Ryan Baldi reports

ENGLAND

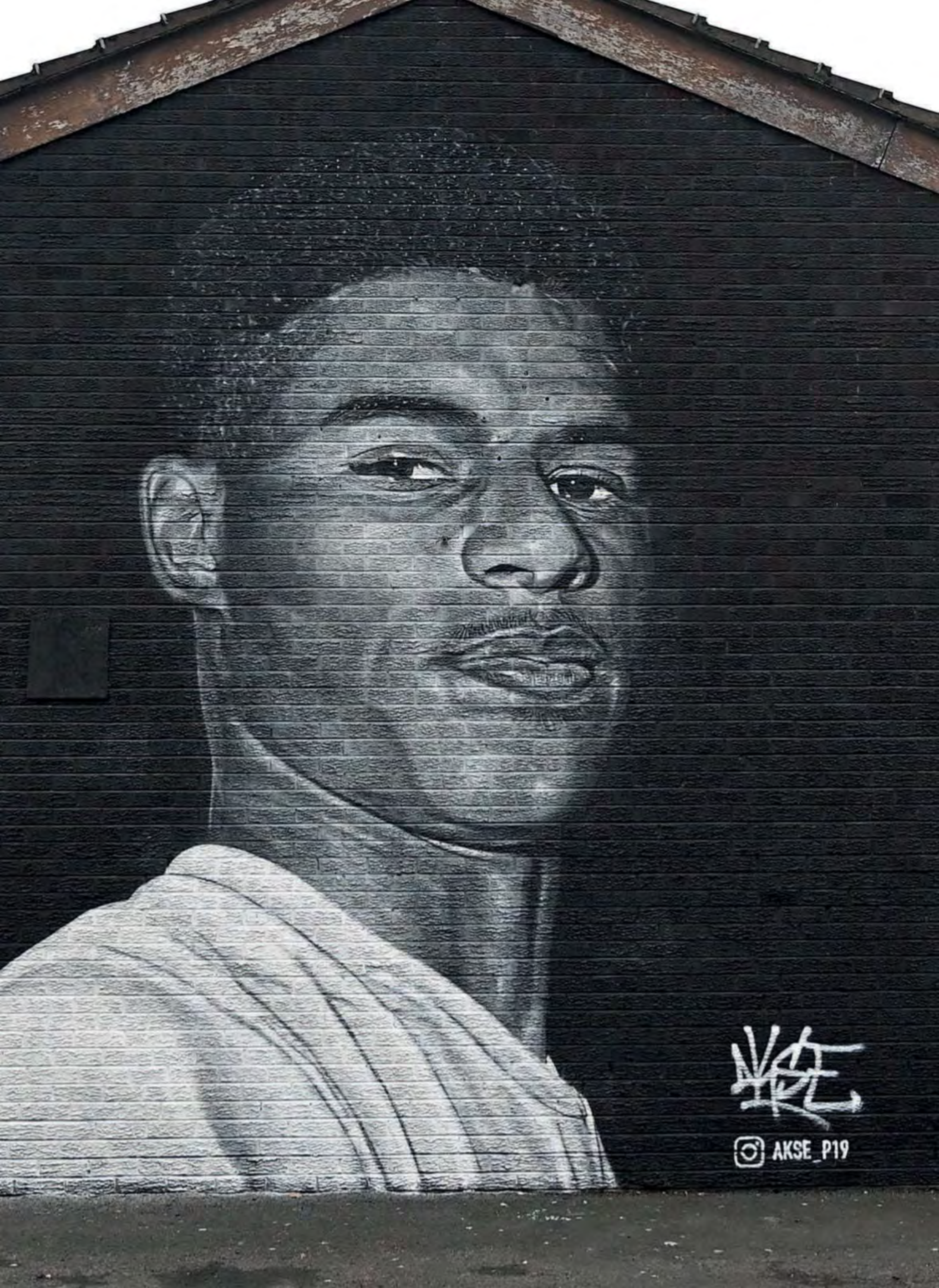
Marcus Rashford: Manchester's superhero

How the Manchester United and England forward went from promising youngster to a national treasure

Back in April, as the coronavirus pandemic was tightening its grip on the United Kingdom, health secretary Matt Hancock used a televised public briefing to take aim at Premier League footballers, suggesting they needed to "make a contribution, take a pay cut and play their part".

It was a craven attempt to deflect focus from the scrutiny the government's handling of the virus was beginning to draw, and to jab an accusing finger at a group often viewed by the wider populace as overpaid and underworked. But, little did Hancock know, the altruistic efforts of one Premier League player in particular were already supporting the vulnerable and would soon inspire a nation.

"How can I help?" wrote Marcus Rashford when he first approached FareShare via email in February. The Manchester United forward had been inspired by the food-distribution charity's ActiveAte initiative the previous summer, which sought to supply food to vulnerable children during school holidays, and was concerned the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Mural...a tribute to Rashford in Withington, Manchester

looming pandemic would see yet more kids from low-income households go hungry in the months to follow.

"It's very rare to have an inbound offer, and an offer that says: 'What do you need and how can I help?'" says Alyson Walsh, FareShare's commercial director.

By the end of June, Rashford had helped raise around £20 million for FareShare, shattering his initial target of £100,000. He'd also lent his support to the Black Lives Matter campaign, spoken out against online bullying and successfully campaigned the government to overturn its decision not to extend the free-school-meals scheme over the summer holidays and implement a £120 million "COVID Summer Food Fund" which reached 1.3 million children.

Rashford's efforts are informed by his own experiences. The 23-year-old has spoken openly about how important free school meals were to him as a child, and how hard his mother, Melanie, a single parent of five, had to work and budget to keep the family fed. "It's definitely because he remembers his family, he remembers he was on school dinners and how difficult it was for his mum," says Dave Horrocks, chairman of Rashford's first grassroots club, Fletcher Moss Rangers.

And it was the gift for football Rashford displayed upon joining Fletcher Moss – who'd previously reared Manchester United stars Wes Brown, Danny Welbeck and Jesse Lingard – as a five-year-old that signposted a route to a more comfortable existence.

Hero...Rashford has earned many plaudits this season

Manchester born and bred...Marcus has been at United since the age of seven

He shone on the Mersey Bank playing fields of West Didsbury, where Fletcher Moss are based, once scoring 12 goals in a single game and revelling in nutmegging the coaches or scoring from the halfway line. The young striker was seven years old when Horrocks received a call from a United scout inviting Rashford to train with the Premier League club.

Rashford would exhaust himself in those early sessions with United, to the point he'd fall asleep against one of his older brothers, Dwaine or Dane, on the drive home. But then, when he'd arrive back at the modest, terraced family home – initially in Withington and Fallowfield, later in Wythenshawe – he'd spring back to life, practising his touch by throwing a ball against a sloped roof and controlling it as it fell, or racing to join his friends kicking a ball around beneath the cherry tree in front of his house.

"He was getting as much football as possible," says Horrocks, "because that's what he wanted to do."

When he was just 11, in recognition both of his exceptional talent and his difficult circumstances, Rashford became the youngest player ever enrolled into United's MANUSS (Manchester United Schoolboy Scholarship) scheme. That meant an increased training schedule, attendance at the club's affiliated Ashton-on-Mersey School and a move to live with host parents close to the school and the training complex at Carrington. "That was the important point for him because it gave him extra stability," says Paul McGuinness, a prominent former United youth coach.

Early signs of the conscientiousness and empathy that have marked out Rashford's activism this year can be found in his progression through United's academy. The 20-time champions of England make a concerted effort to instil such values in their youngsters – "right is might" was first coined by former director of youth football Jim Ryan, and is an often-repeated mantra within the Carrington hallways. Politeness to all staff and visitors is demanded, and on tournament trips abroad, the boys take turns making speeches to thank their hosts, presenting pennants to opponents and gifts to hotel workers.

"Marcus would have had to do it a few times," says Colin Little, the United Under-18 coach. "They all get a chance at it, to go and speak to the man in the canteen or go and give him a signed shirt. I'm sure other clubs are doing it, but when I got here, I'd never seen it before. You look at Marcus now, and you think, wow, what a good spokesman."

Wearing the famous red shirt on tournament jaunts gives United's youngsters a small taste of the fan attention thrust upon the club's senior stars. When, as a 16-year-old, Rashford was part of a travelling squad participating in the Milk Cup in Northern Ireland, he revelled in pleasing the young supporters who'd queued up for an autograph or a moment's interaction with a future hero.

"They were getting quite big crowds," remembers McGuinness. "There are kids coming up, wanting autographs. He would be one of the ones who really engaged with the fans and engaged

> "It's very rare to have an inbound offer, and an offer that says: 'What do you need and how can I help?'"
>
> **Alyson Walsh, FareShare commercial director**

Helping out... teaming up with charity FareShare

with the kids. He saw it as part of the idea that he's in a privileged position, that these kids, he could make them happy and he could do positive things."

That empathy, his desire to give something back and help others less fortunate, is something Tosin Kehinde, a friend and former youth team-mate, recognised instantly in Rashford.

"He did speak about how his upbringing shaped him into the person he was," Kehinde says, "and how much he loved the team he was at, Fletcher Moss. He always talked about going back and seeing the kids whenever he could. That showed a little bit of the side of him we're seeing right now.

"When you're playing for Manchester United and England, with some people it might go to their heads and change their characters a little bit, but never has that been the case with Marcus."

And the fruits of Rashford's charitable nature were abundant long before his work with FareShare and his vocal activism in 2020. At Christmas time in 2018, the United superstar personally delivered care packages – containing thermal clothing, underwear and toothpaste – to Manchester's homeless; he partnered with Selfridges on a similar campaign the following year. He's been back to visit pupils at one of his old schools, too, dispensing advice and words of inspiration. He even once handed over £1,000 to ensure all the children could take home a chocolate selection box at Christmas. One day he hopes to establish his own foundation.

While United's academy might have provided a platform upon which his nascent selflessness was able to flourish, those who worked closest with Rashford in the youth ranks cannot – and do not – claim credit for the extent of his altruism.

"That comes from God, I think, a young man to do that," says Tony Whelan, United's assistant academy director. "That comes from within, that comes from him. I don't think it's something that anybody else should take credit for in that sense. For us to see it with a young boy within our tenure at the club, those that have been around him and have had the privilege to work with him, it does give you a sense of pride."

Almost universally, in conversations with those who have worked closely with Rashford along his journey from academy fledgling to Old Trafford icon, the word "mature" recurs.

It applies to his above-the-curve talent, which saw him taking on the likes of future first-team colleagues Paul Pogba and Jesse Lingard – both almost five years his senior – in one-v-one contests in a small, caged all-weather pitch as an undersized 12-year-old training with the U18s.

But it also applies to his ability to deal with setbacks and welcome unexpected opportunities. When a bout of Osgood-Schlatter disease – a painful knee condition common among adolescent boys – temporarily corroded his mobility and scythed his trademark pace, for example, he focused on sharpening other skills, dropping into central midfield and broadening his passing arsenal.

And when, in February of 2016, a pre-game injury ruled Anthony Martial out of a Europa League showdown with Midtjylland at Old Trafford, United's coaching staff didn't hesitate in elevating an 18-year-old Rashford to the starting line-up for his first-team debut.

"I'm not going to change anything," Louis van Gaal, United's manager at the time, told his staff in the changing room. "Marcus is going to come in. He's capable of doing it. I'm confident in that."

Van Gaal's confidence, of course, was well placed. Rashford exhibited a veteran's poise as he scored twice in a 5-1 victory, and followed it up three days later with another brace, against Arsenal, on his Premier League debut.

"I had to explain to him the set pieces," Frans Hoek, one of Van Gaal's assistants, remembers of the ad-hoc preparations for the Midtjylland game. "I went to him. I looked him in the eyes. Of course, he must have been nervous, but it didn't show. He was concentrated on what he had to do. He made a very strong impression on me. That look in his eyes, it was, 'Ok, I have a chance now and I can show them.'

"He's a different character, and different characters can do incredible things, things that surprise you. The beautiful thing for me is, he has a platform because of the player he is and he's using it to help other human beings.

"Mature is a very good word for him."

It should have come as little surprise, then, that Rashford conducted himself like an adult among squabbling children when Parliament, by a margin of 322 to 261, voted against a Labour Party motion to, as Rashford had implored,

Impact... celebrating his debut goal v Midtjylland

extend free school meals into October's half-term break and beyond. He has, on numerous occasions, appealed to MPs to put aside party politics and sniping for the greater good, aiming to smooth tensions more tribal even than those he has overcome in earning the support of rivals fans, players and clubs. He also took to social media to request that his followers refrain from directing abuse at these politicians, citing his own experience as a target for online bile as something no one should have to endure.

Inspired by Rashford's fight against child food poverty and sharing his despair at the decision to curtail the scheme – which had provided meal vouchers worth £15 a week to children in low-income families outside of school term time – cafes, restaurants, pubs and even local councils around the country began to pledge to fill the gap. Rashford's Twitter timeline was alight in late October as he retweeted these organisations, notifying his followers of where the free food for the vulnerable could be found.

> "He has a platform because of the player he is and he's using it to help other human beings."
>
> **Former Manchester United coach Frans Hoek**

He was awarded an MBE in the Queen's birthday honours in October, to add to the PFA Merit Award and recognition from the Football Writers' Association, the City of Manchester and the Pride of Britain awards. Rather than allow these accolades to bookend a job well done, though, Rashford's admirable off-field work continues. In November, he forced yet another about-face from the government, with prime minister Boris Johnson calling the United striker to confirm a pledge of £170 million to combat child food poverty through the winter and into the new year.

This announcement came just days after Rashford teamed up with Burberry to launch a series of initiatives to help disadvantaged people, including a £25,000 grant to two youth clubs he attended as a boy and a donation to FareShare that will finance 200,000 meals.

In a letter to his ten-year-old self he penned for the campaign, Rashford wrote: "For a young boy who says so little, one day you will have a voice that speaks for many."

With boundless reserves of empathy and the courage of his convictions, Rashford has effected real change and emerged as an icon and role model for a generation. Contribution made. Part played. And then some.

ABOVE: Charity... Marcus with his mother Melanie

BELOW: Black Lives Matter...he has also lent his support to the anti-racism campaign

eye witness

Peterjon Cresswell reports

SLOVAKIA & HUNGARY

DAC: the forefront of Hungary's expanding football empire

In Budapest and Debrecen, Szeged and Kisvarda, Miskolc and Mezokovesd, football-mad Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban has built spanking new football stadiums to host domestic matches which invariably attract relatively few paying customers. Average pre-pandemic attendances for the top-flight NBI in 2018-19 was just over 3,000, and even below that modest benchmark the season before. The team in Szeged has never played in the top tier.

His folly is best illustrated by the Pancho Arena, the first and most incongruous of these developments, which is set in the tiny hamlet of Felcsut where Orban spent part of his youth. Even the narrow-gauge railway running to the stadium has been renovated, as if offering the few visitors a journey through Orban's childhood.

But this phenomenon has not been limited to Hungary. Beyond its borders, the gleaming new MOL Arena stands near the centre of unassuming Dunajska Streda, or Dunaszerdahely to the many Hungarians who live in this sleepy town in Slovakia. This is the home of DAC, currently in with a credible shot at a first Slovak title. For ten straight rounds of the current campaign, they led champions Slovan Bratislava, although when the league adjourned for a winter break in December, the holders had moved five points clear with four matches remaining.

DAC stands for Dunaszerdahelyi Atletikai Club, formed in 1904 when this area of southern Slovakia was still part of Hungary. Even today, a century after the treaty that ceded the region to the nascent Czechoslovakia, 80 per cent of the population of Dunajska Streda is ethnic Hungarian.

Significant areas of Transylvania in modern Romania, much of northern Serbia, plus pockets of northern Croatia and Slovenia, still contain substantial Hungarian communities. These territories were also lost after World War I – and a century later, they are also welcoming new stadiums, in Sepsiszentgyorgy, Backa Topola and Osijek, where top-flight – and sometimes European – football are played a long way from Budapest.

Orban's extension of his 30-strong stadium empire to the far reaches of the pre-1918 kingdom is not just about his football obsession. It's also a political move. One of the cornerstones upon which his Fidesz party has built its relentless national rule since 2010 has been the granting of dual citizenship to Hungarian minorities outside the borders. This measure was adopted the same year that Fidesz swept back to power with a landslide victory. In gratitude, Magyar voters in Slovakia, Transylvania and Serbia almost unanimously scrawl an X next to Fidesz at every election. While Budapest voted for a non-Fidesz mayor in 2019, 96 per cent of the diaspora wanted an Orban-led government for the fourth time of asking in 2018.

MOL, as in the MOL Arena, stands for Magyar Olaj- es Gazipari Reszvenytarsasag – Hungarian Oil & Gas PLC, the country's main energy provider. The DAC owner is boyhood fan Oszkar Vilagi, of Hungarian extraction, who started out as a lawyer before moving into politics and high-level business. Along with advising foreign investors on the Slovak market,

Viktor Orban... Hungary's football-mad prime minister is investing in football beyond his country's borders

he acted on behalf of MOL in its acquisition of its Slovak counterpart, Slovnaft. The Hungarians duly found a place for him on the board of Slovnaft, where he has been chairman and CEO for over a decade.

In 2011, Vilagi joined the board of directors at MOL, the same year that Orban's Hungarian government acquired 21 per cent of the oil giant, a stake that has since risen to 25 per cent. It was also around this time that Orban began building stadiums – first at Felcsut, then Ferencvaros, with whom DAC fans have a cross-border fraternity.

In 2014, Vilagi bought DAC, whose main achievement until then had been a solitary Czechoslovak Cup win, on penalties, in 1987. Keeping his club competitive in the Slovak Super Liga, Vilagi set about creating an MOL-branded soccer hub of a UEFA-rated four-star stadium and ten-pitch football academy. Constructed in two stages, the MOL Arena cost €22 million, €2m coming from MOL, €4.4m from the Slovak State and the City of Dunajska Streda, which has 25.6 per cent ownership. MOL has 22.5 per cent. The EHCS Group, a brokerage and acquisitions company headed by Vilagi's daughter Reka, has a controlling interest of 51.9 per cent.

The MOL academy required an investment of €14m. The Slovak FA is thought to have put in nearly €3m for the stadium and academy, while Orban's government provided €7.4m. It covers an 18-hectare complex southwest of town, near a four-star spa hotel, with ten full-sized pitches, three smaller ones, two stands and a gym. A policy of selling on young players was soon illustrated when Ivory Coast striker Issouf Bayo, whose ten league goals had put DAC in title contention for the first time, went to Scottish giants Celtic for €2.25m in 2019.

Zsolt Kalmar...DAC and Hungary star

Photographed at the opening ceremony of the academy in November 2018, the Hungarian prime minister was a surprising absence when the MOL Arena was unveiled three months later – although many of his compatriots made the trip up from Budapest.

Opened to a celebration of Hungarian culture – a pig-killing, plentiful palinka brandy and an appearance by national swimming hero Katinka Hosszu – the MOL Arena holds 12,700, around half the local population. It was close to capacity, every home seat sold, for its grand curtain-raising match: DAC v Slovan Bratislava, in 2019.

It turned out to be a day of songs, smoke bombs and soft penalties. As the explosive mist of red, white and green carried the colours of the Hungarian flag across the grassy surface, heavy metal veterans Pokolgep blasted out "*Nelkuled*" ("Without You"), signature anthem of Hungarians living outside the country's current borders. Then came the soft penalty, scored by Andraz Sporar of Slovan, given by referee Filip Glova, whose previous key decision had been to rule out a DAC goal for offside. Glova was later called in by the Slovak FA and not given another top-flight game for a whole month.

Slovan went on to win the title, then again in 2020. That summer, Bernd Storck came to DAC. The former Hungary national team coach had already taken the Magyars to their first major finals for 40 years, beating Austria and drawing with eventual winners Portugal at Euro 2016. The German arrived in Slovakia two years after Marco Rossi had led DAC to a highest-ever third place in the league. The Italian is now the current Hungary coach, responsible for a recently successful qualifying campaign that swept the national side to another Euro finals this summer. Two of their

[Hungary president] Viktor Orban's extension of his 30-strong stadium empire to the far reaches of the pre-1918 kingdom is not just about his football obsession. It's also a political move

Bernd Storck...guided Hungary to Euro 2016

MOL Arena... home to DAC

matches will be played at the national Puskas Arena in Budapest – another Orban new-build.

Storck, meanwhile, has two current Hungarian internationals at his disposal, most notably club captain Zsolt Kalmar. Used by Rossi at DAC in 2018, the wide midfielder scored a vital goal in Hungary's Euro play-off win in Bulgaria in October 2020. Back in Dunajska Streda, the ginger-haired Kalmar is also enjoying a purple patch at club level, the top scorer and a near ever-present as DAC bid to knock Slovan off their perch.

Connections between Dunajska Streda and Hungary extend beyond the football pitch and the business around it. The whole town centre was redesigned by that most distinctively Hungarian of architects, Imre Makovecz. A short walk along the main street, past the Cafe Budapest, takes you to Sport utca. Turn the corner and ahead glowers a sleek grey edifice entirely at architectural odds with the quaint one-storey houses around it: the MOL Arena.

Over the border in Hungary, the Pancho Arena dominates the hamlet of Felcsut where Viktor Orban grew up. "Pancho" is how Spanish fans referred to Ferenc Puskas when Hungary's greatest player was winning European Cups for Real Madrid and that gives the ground

Pancho Arena... Orban's next football project

its name – but the design is pure Magyar. The turrets and intricate vaulting reflect the organic Hungarian style of Imre Makovecz, drawn up shortly before he died.

The same radical Hungarian architect who revamped the centre of Dunajska Streda bowed out with this stadium as his swansong, a church-like construction in wood – Makovecz was a devout Catholic – for a football team representing a village half its size. But also like Dunajska Streda, the football complex in Felcsut is also an academy – in fact, Puskas Akademia, as the top-flight club also based there is named. It hosts the annual Puskas Cup for Under-17s, invariably involving the juniors from Pancho's old clubs of Honved and Real Madrid.

Orban and Oszkar Vilagi both understand the long-term value of football academies. While the one at DAC has yet to bear fruit, the star pupil produced by Puskas Akademia now plays for Osijek in Croatia. Laszlo Kleinheisler, a surprise pick by then national team coach Bernd Storck, shot to glory when his goal in Oslo powered Hungary past Norway and onto Euro 2016. Soon Kleinheisler and Osijek will run out in a new stadium, almost completed by the banks of the Drava River that forms the border between Hungary and Croatia.

And who owns NK Osijek? Lorinc Meszaros, a former gasfitter whose ties with Orban's ruling party allowed him to become mayor of Felcsut for seven years – and the richest man in Hungary.

AVFC
CAZOO
AVFC

JACK THE LAD

Jack Grealish is the talk of the town after a sensational season for both Aston Villa and England, captaining his boyhood club in the Premier League and becoming a key man ahead of Euro 2020

Words: Nick Bidwell

Sublime Brazilian-like ball skills. Lashings of boldness and imagination. Exceptional ability to dribble at pace. Slicked back hair. Socks at half-mast revealing shin pads the size of a postage stamp. On the field of play, Jack Grealish has no trouble standing out in a crowd.

It's what he's always done, even cutting a conspicuous footballing figure as an infant. Just ask long-serving Midlands talent spotter Jim Thomas, who first clapped eyes on Jack when the Birmingham-born showstopper was just six years old. Thomas, whose list of discoveries includes Villa, Liverpool and Rangers winger Mark Walters, Manchester United wide-man Lee Sharpe and Derby County striker Dean Sturridge, still has vivid memories of that damp Sunday morning back in 2002, turning up at a park in the Shirley district of Solihull and watching open-mouthed as the kid in the oversized shirt turned on the style for Highgate United in a six-a-side encounter.

"You couldn't fail to miss him," Thomas told the *Birmingham Mail* last year. "As soon as I'm there, he's got the ball in his own penalty area and has dribbled right through the team. He was very small. It was like looking at Maradona."

After introducing himself on the touchline to Jack's mother Karen, Thomas straight away enquired if the youngster would like to join the Villa academy. The response? A big, fat yes. Like his father Kevin, Jack was a Villa fan through and through, a claret and blue disciple from top to toe. He was only four years old when he attended his first game at Villa Park in January 2000 – a pulsating 3-2 FA Cup win over Leeds United. At seven he was a season ticket holder and regularly went on the road to away games.

Growing up, Jack was particularly fond of Villa striker Gabby Agbonlahor, a virtual one-club man who spent 13 seasons in the first team there, is the club's all-time leading Premier League goalscorer and won three caps for England. Agbonlahor was still at Villa when Grealish first broke into the club's first team as a 19-year-old in 2015 and was a privileged witness to all of Jack's early career milestones: his first start in the FA Cup against Blackpool in January 2015; his full Premier League debut in a 3-3 home draw with QPR in April; his

pivotal role the same month as Villa upset Liverpool 2-1 in an FA Cup semi-final; his subsequent appearance in the final (albeit in a 4-0 hammering by Arsenal at Wembley), and first Premier League goal in a 3-2 loss at Leicester.

Agbonlahor and Grealish form quite the mutual appreciation society. Jack singles out Gabby as one of his role models, while the latter never tires of returning the compliment, happy to describe Jack as the most gifted player he played with and comparing the 25-year-old to Barcelona and Spain midfield great Andres Iniesta.

Grealish is just one branch of a towering oak of a Villa family tree. His dad Kevin was on hand to soak up the atmosphere at every Villa triumph of the last 40 years – their stunning league title in 1980-81, the conquest of the European Cup the following season and the 1995-96 League Cup – while his great, great grandfather Billy Garraty pocketed an FA Cup winners' medal with the Villa way back in 1905. Garraty earned one England cap; Jack already has trumped him on that score, with five senior appearances for the Three Lions.

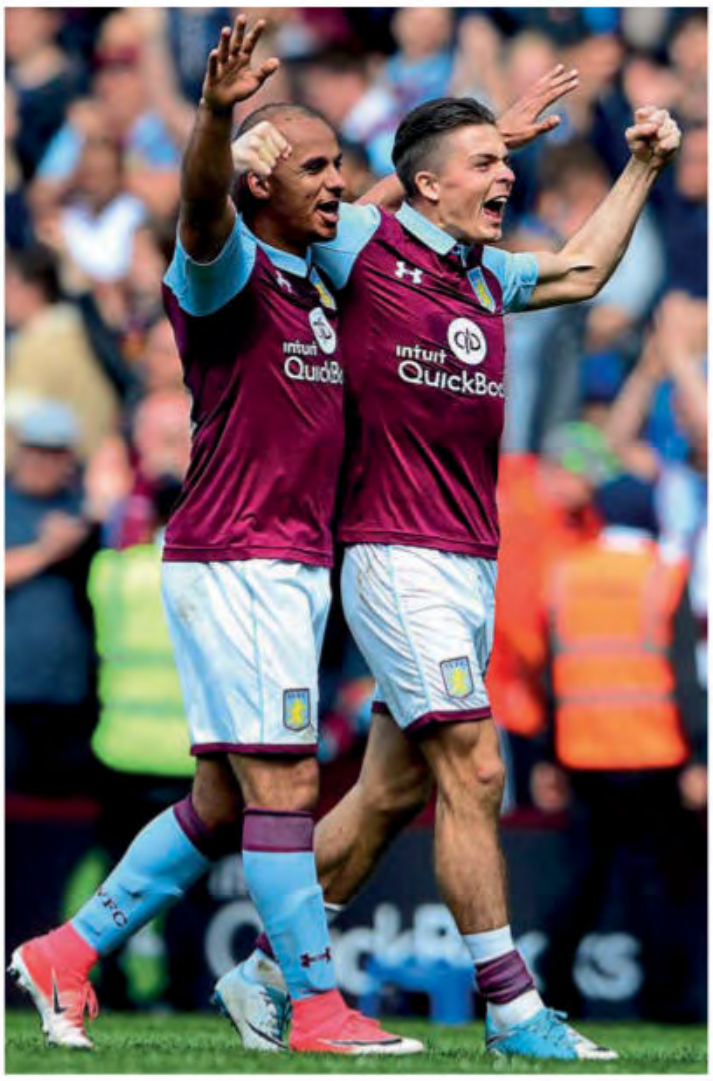
With roots like that, there was always every chance that Grealish would successfully climb the football ladder. He had the natural flair to die for, and was obsessed with the game from the earliest of ages. All he wanted to do was kick a ball, and that was what he did: in the school playground, in the back garden of the family home in Solihull in the West Midlands, a local park or any other space where he, his elder brother Kevan and his cousins could do their thing.

Nor did he ever want for desire. Every day he had a new trick to master, more work to do on his weaker left foot, a fresh frontier to reach. As a schoolboy, Jack trained with Villa three nights a week, yet he would have happily made the 30-mile round trip on a daily basis. His hunger was insatiable.

Villa, well aware that they had a gem in their midst, treated him with great care in the academy ranks. On the one hand, giving him plenty of licence to express himself and exploit his rare poise, guile and vision. On the other,

Coming of age... the 2015 FA Cup semi-final was a turning point in Grealish's career

NextGen Series...the competition that gave Jack his first taste of continental competition



Team-mates...Gabby Agbonlahor was a big influence on Grealish's early career

teaching him good habits. In those days, he would often be deployed in age-groups a couple of rungs above his own and would often be used wide on the left, the rationale being that he would have a little more protection away from the trenches.

The developmental plan was a good one. At the age of 16, in March 2012, he enjoyed his first taste of the Premier League scene, picked by then-Villa manager Alex McLeish to sit on the bench during a 4-2 home defeat to Chelsea. The next season he was in Europe, starring in the Villa Under-19 side that won the UEFA NextGen Series – the continent's leading youth competition. Of all those young Villa heroes, Jack was the only one to go on to establish himself at the club.

A few more of his rough edges were smoothed off during a loan spell in 2013-14 at English third-tier side Notts County, where the hurly-burly style of play and County's season-long struggle against relegation toughened him up. He was kicked from pillar to post, yet still came back for more.

Without his sterling efforts that season – five goals, seven assists – Notts County would not have hauled themselves out of the drop zone at the death.

Throughout the campaign, he proved pure entertainment gold, exemplified by his first-ever senior goal, a wonderful effort in a 3-1 win over

> "He was very small. It was like looking at Maradona"
>
> Talent scout Jim Thomas

Up-and-coming... Grealish clashes with Chelsea's Andreas Christensen in 2013

Timeline

AUG 14, 2013
Makes his debut for the Republic of Ireland Under-21s as a late substitute in a 4-1 victory over the Faroe Islands.

SEP 13, 2013
Joins Notts County on loan for a year, going on to make 37 League One appearances for the Magpies.

MAY 7, 2014
After returning from Nottingham, he makes his Aston Villa debut in a 4-0 defeat to Manchester City in the Premier League.

Gillingham in December. Here was the Grealish we have come to know and love, picking up a loose ball on the edge of the box, effortlessly gliding past four defenders and firing high into the net. The aftermath was memorable too, with Jack rushing to the main stand to embrace his dad, receiving a booking for over-celebrating, then pointing upwards, a tribute to his late younger brother Keelan, who passed away from cot death in 2000 when Jack was just four years old.

Then-Notts County manager Shaun Derry remembers Jack as a "chirpy" individual, who played with "freshness". "He didn't really seem to understand the importance of training at the time," Derry told the *Birmingham Mail*. "He just wanted to play football, to play five-a-side games and full matches. When he did turn out and was on form, he was unplayable."

Upon his return, Grealish earned his first senior run-out – a two-minute cameo versus Manchester City in May 2014 – yet struggled for first-team opportunities under Paul Lambert. The former Scotland midfielder generally gave the impression that Grealish was too raw and too ill-disciplined, once referring to him as a "baby".

All was to change, though, when Lambert was replaced by Tim Sherwood in February 2015. The latter had much more regard for Grealish's maverick abilities, and within a couple of months of Sherwood's arrival, Grealish was featuring in Villa's shock FA Cup semi-final victory over Liverpool, undoubtedly the watershed moment of his career. "That Liverpool game was huge, with a lot of expectancy and pressure," said Sherwood afterwards. "It didn't faze him. He grew."

Promotion...Villa beat Derby County in the 2019 play-off final

With Grealish's profile growing on the pitch, more attention came off it. In 2015, the tabloids made a song and dance of him inhaling laughing gas and a couple of months later, pictures emerged of him sprawled on the street during a holiday in Tenerife. In the autumn of 2016, Villa fined him for attending a rowdy late-night party that got out of hand at a Birmingham hotel, and he still has plenty of maturing to do: in December he was banned from driving for nine months and fined over £80,000 for two motoring offences.

> "That Liverpool game was huge, with a lot of expectancy and pressure. It didn't faze him. He grew"
>
> **Ex-Villa manager Tim Sherwood**

Equally controversial was his decision back in 2015 to switch international allegiance from the Republic of Ireland to England. Grealish, who qualified for the Republic through his grandparents,

Carabao Cup...last season Villa reached the final thanks to Grealish's displays

APR 19, 2015
Produces a man of the match performance as Villa overcome Liverpool in the FA Cup semi-final, winning 2-1.

MAY 30, 2015
Plays the entirety of the FA Cup final at Wembley Stadium as Villa lose 4-0 to Arsenal.

SEP 13, 2015
Scores his first Villa goal, a long-range shot against Leicester City in a 3-2 defeat in the Premier League.

SEP 28, 2015
Confirms he will represent England at international level, having turned down a senior call-up from the Republic of Ireland.

APR 16, 2016
Villa's relegation from the Premier League is confirmed with a 1-0 defeat to Manchester United.

Second City derby...Grealish celebrates striking the winner against Birmingham City

represented them at various under-age levels, but when push came to shove, he chose to nail his colours to the country of his birth.

"I thought about it for a long time, spoke with my family and my agent, but in the end, it came from me," Grealish explained in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2016. "If I fulfil my ability, I feel I can play for England in years to come. I was born here, as were my parents, so I feel more English than Irish."

Inevitably, many Irish fans took it badly. They had seen Grealish as one of their own, someone so committed to his roots that as a schoolboy he played Gaelic football to a high standard for a leading Birmingham club. Now he was turning his back on them and the backlash was especially brutal on social media. "Congratulations on your international retirement," snarkily wrote one Ireland supporter. That tweet, to say the least, has not aged well.

In September, almost five years after switching his international allegiance, Grealish made his England debut off the bench against Denmark. A month later, he made his first start in a friendly against Wales. "Excellent," read the match reports. "Outstanding." "Inventive." "An impressive all-round display."

"He is a different type of player to any that we have," said Gareth Southgate after the game. Yet for a long time, the England manager had resisted calls to include Grealish in his squads, insisting that the likes of Raheem Sterling, Jadon Sancho and Marcus Rashford were all better options in his front three. In spite of more impressive performances in the autumn, there is a sense that when everybody is fit, Southgate may still prefer others.

Midfield magic...this season Grealish has starred alongside Ross Barkley and John McGinn in the Villans' midfield

For fans, there is no doubt: Grealish should be among the first names on the team sheet, although this popularity is relatively new. The playmaker has often been accused of diving, in spite of the fact that he attracts rough treatment.

MAY 26, 2018

Plays all 90 minutes as Villa are beaten 1-0 by Fulham in the Championship play-off final at Wembley.

MAR 10, 2019

Captains the team in the Birmingham derby at St. Andrew's and is assaulted by a pitch invader, yet goes on to score the winner.

MAY 27, 2019

After winning a club record ten games in a row, he captains Villa to victory in the play-off final, beating Derby County 2-1.

JUL 26, 2020

Scores the goal that ensures Villa's safety on the final day of the season. Voted Villa's Player of the Season by both the players and fans.

Next generation...he is one of several exciting young England attackers

Last season he was fouled 167 times in the Premier League – more than anybody else in the division, a record that he also held in the Championship the year before.

Just like his time at Notts County, the three seasons that Grealish spent in England's second tier played a vital role in toughening him up. His arrival in 2016-17 came off the back of a season in which his boyhood club had been relegated with a pitiful 17 points, where he himself had played 16 games and lost every single one – another unwanted record.

The pain of relegation affected Grealish more than most of his team-mates, as did the pressure from fans to get back up again – pressure that increased with each passing year. The Villans finished 13th in their first season, and more hurt followed in 2017-18 when they lost the play-off final against Fulham at Wembley.

The defeat was a huge blow, and the hangover was felt into the following season. In October, with the club lying 14th, manager Steve Bruce was sacked and replaced by Dean Smith. A fellow boyhood Villa fan, the former Brentford boss quickly struck up an excellent relationship with Grealish. In March, following a three-month injury absence, the midfielder was named captain for a home clash with Derby County, and was instrumental in a 4-0 victory.

A week later, he retained the armband for the Second City derby at Birmingham City. Ten minutes in, the game took an extraordinary turn when a home fan ran onto the pitch and punched Grealish in the back of the head. Pictures from the day show him looking shocked, then slightly embarrassed, laughing nervously at the ensuing furore; then, finally, jubilant as he celebrated scoring the winner with his own fans.

"Best day of my life," he grinned to an interviewer after the game. "To come here for the first time as captain of Aston Villa and score the winner – it's what dreams are made of."

From that point on, Villa were unstoppable. With Grealish in the team they won all but one of their remaining games, overcoming local rivals West Bromwich Albion in the play-off semi-finals, before edging out Derby in the final. It was his third Wembley final with Villa and first taste of victory, for once getting his hands on the trophy instead of lying inconsolable on the pitch.

Key man...Grealish impressed during England's autumn internationals

The heroics continued the following season, with a late goal v West Ham on the final day guaranteeing Villa's Premier League survival. A summer transfer was widely expected yet resisted, with a five-year contract signed in September.

That deal has not put an end to the transfer rumours, but it has helped swell Aston Villa's asking price to around £100 million. As have his performances – not only with England but also at club level, most notably in the 7-2 destruction of Liverpool. But it will not be easy for Jack to sever the ties that bind him to Villa Park, his home from home for almost two decades.

A big decision on Grealish's future is approaching; things are getting serious. But you wouldn't know it. He continues to carry on playing with every bit of nonchalance that his junior-sized shin pads suggest, knowing that he is living the dream.

> "If I fulfil my ability, I feel I can play for England in years to come. I was born here, as were my parents, so I feel more English than Irish"
>
> Grealish on his international future in 2016

Changed allegiances... Grealish earned 19 caps for the Republic of Ireland youth teams

SEP 8, 2020

Makes his England debut as a 76th-minute substitute in a 0-0 draw with Denmark in the UEFA Nations League.

SEP 15, 2020

After weeks of speculation, commits his future to Aston Villa by signing a new five-year contract.

OCT 4, 2020

Scores one goal and assists three as Villa inflict a stunning 7-2 defeat on Liverpool – the Reds' biggest ever Premier League defeat.

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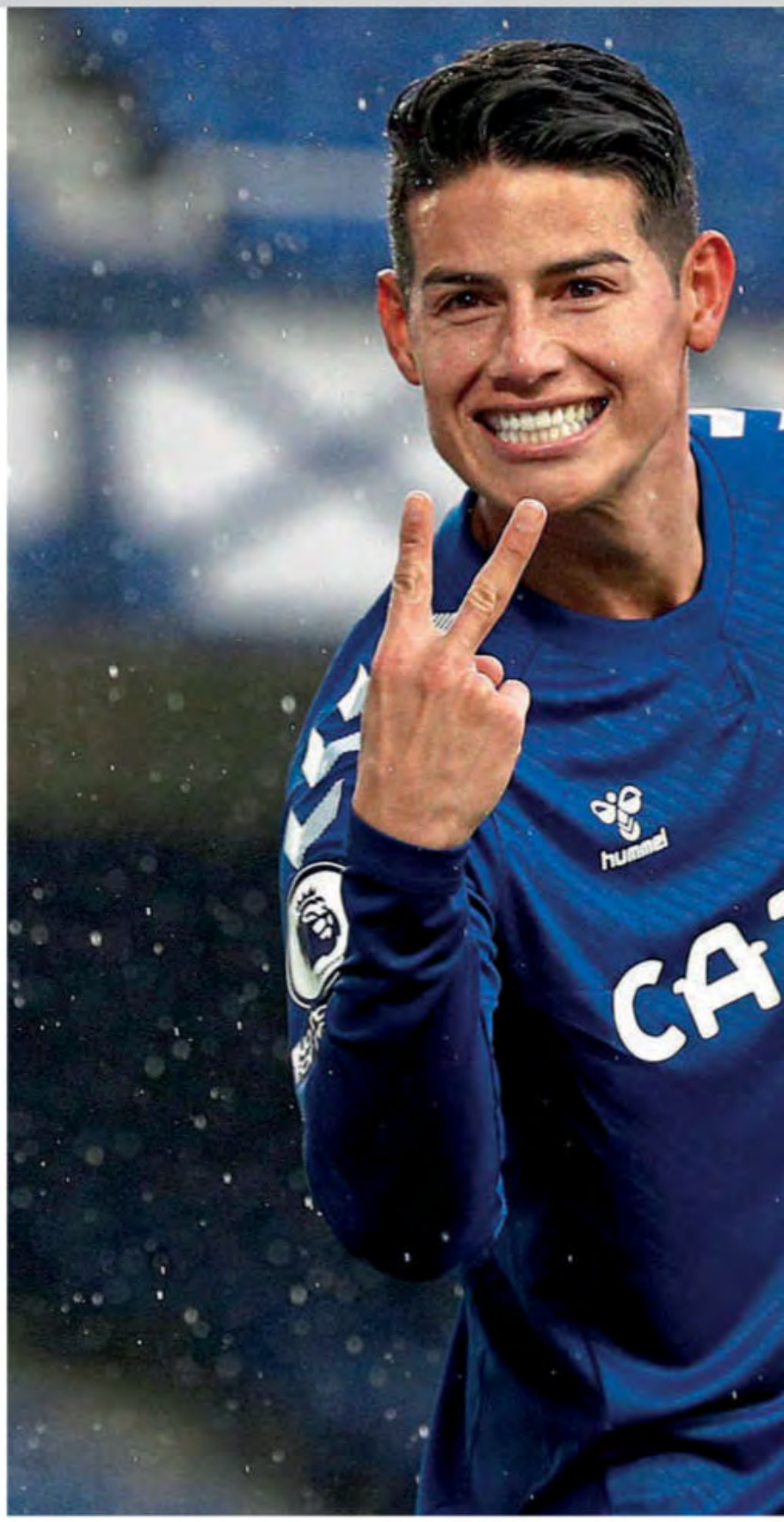
The BIG stories of 2021

...before they happen

Nick Bidwell takes a look at the year's burning questions



1 IS THE EUROPEAN SUPER LEAGUE A REALISTIC POSSIBILITY?

Clearly a raft of the continent's top clubs – including Barcelona, Real Madrid, Atletico Madrid and many of the Premier League's finest – regard a period of pandemic-induced recession as the ideal moment to make the project happen.

However, there are simply too many key protagonists ready to object. UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has deemed the proposed breakaway as "insane", Champions League holders Bayern Munich are not at all interested, while La Liga supremo Javier Tebas provided the ultimate of put-downs: "These underground schemes only look good when drafted in a bar at five o'clock in the morning."

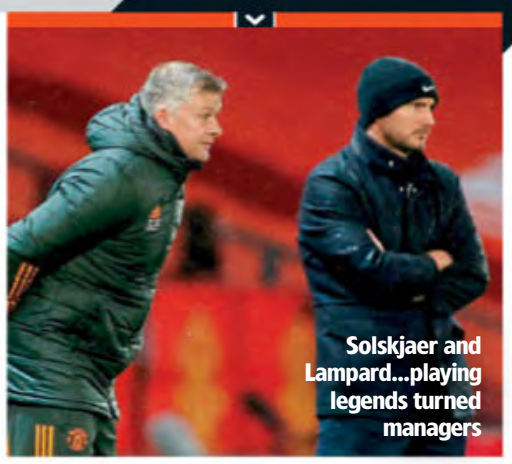
Not on my watch... UEFA president Ceferin

2 WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THOMAS TUCHEL FOLLOWING HIS EXIT FROM PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN?

Put simply, the German boss' days at the Parc des Princes were numbered long before his contract was terminated in December. Tuchel's main beef was that he was not sufficiently respected in France. Last season, for example, he almost achieved a brilliant clean sweep, winning the domestic championship, Cup and League Cup, plus Champions League silver. Yet still had large swathes of the Gallic media gunning for him, criticising his tactics and his side's lack of defined identity.

Sources in England and Germany say Chelsea may be his next port of call, with current Blues boss Frank Lampard under pressure following a patchy run of form.

James Rodriguez...Everton are shoving two fingers up to the established order

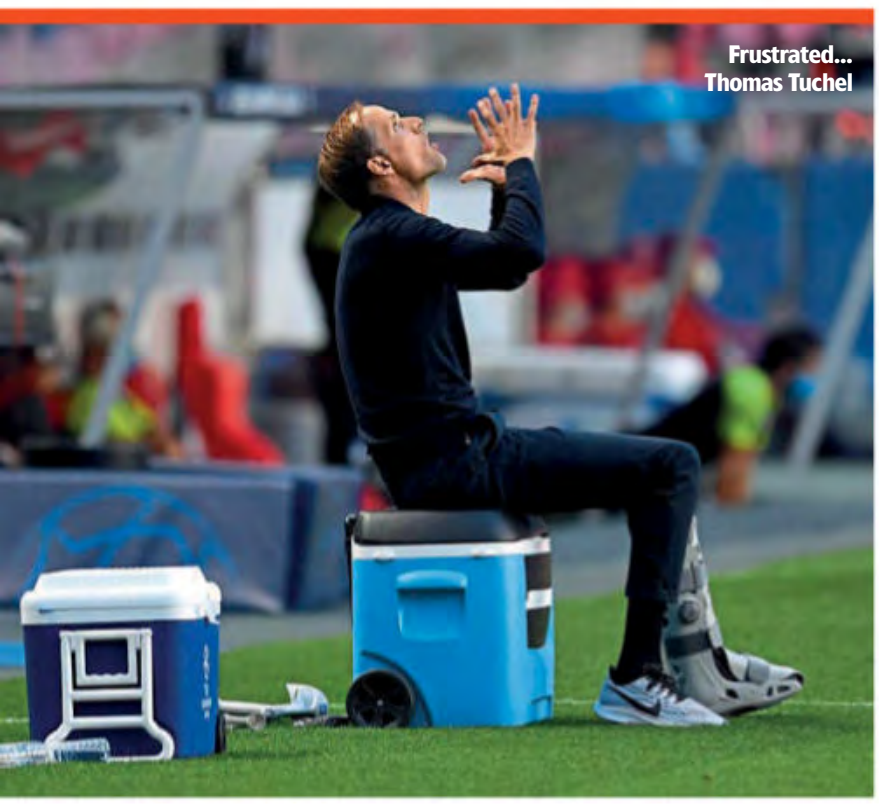

Solskjaer and Lampard...playing legends turned managers

4 WILL TOP PLAYERS KEEP GETTING TOP JOBS?

The sight of legendary players patrolling the touchlines was undoubtedly a theme of 2020, with Andrea Pirlo (Juventus) and Mikel Arteta (Arsenal) following the likes of Frank Lampard (Chelsea), Steven Gerrard (Rangers), Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (Manchester United) and Vincent Kompany (Anderlecht) into the dugout.

Between them, there have been enough positive moments to suggest that this policy is not merely a marketing tool or a sop to star-struck fans, although not enough to conclude that it is a bulletproof strategy either. Whether the aforementioned coaches have the wherewithal to lead a wining team at a high level like Zinedine Zidane (Real Madrid) or Pep Guardiola (Barcelona) have done remains to be seen.

Struggling...30 league matches without a win


Frustrated... Thomas Tuchel

3 ARE WE HEADING FOR A MORE OPEN AND EQUAL PREMIER LEAGUE?

It certainly looks that way. Liverpool's packed treatment room has made them vulnerable; while the frailties of the two Manchester giants are there for all to see (despite United's revival over the festive period); and Arsenal appear to be withering in the post-Wenger era.

Suddenly top-four pretenders are mushrooming, including Jose Mourinho's re-tooled Tottenham and Chelsea (despite a poor recent run), with Aston Villa, Leicester City, Southampton, West Ham, Leeds, Everton and Wolves all aiming to upset the established order.

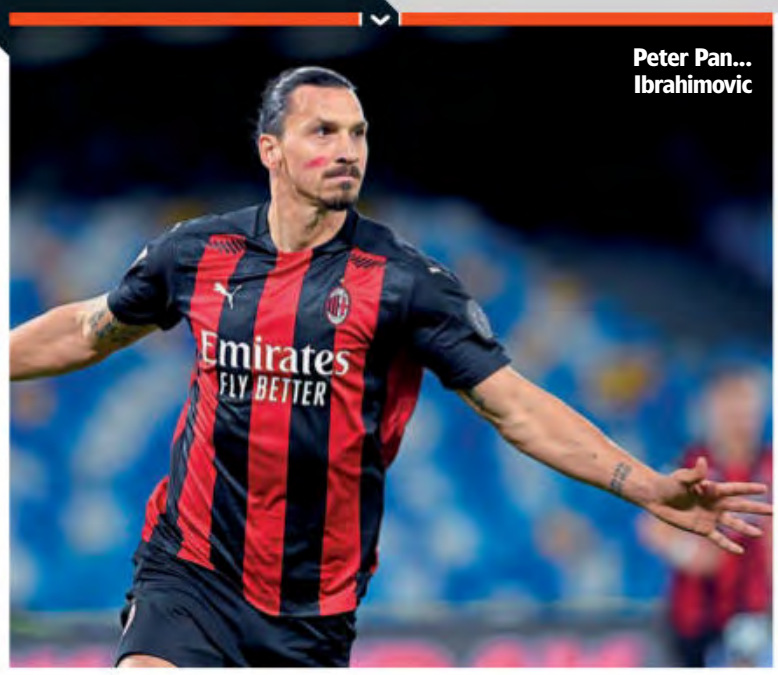
Has the economic consequences of COVID-19 and playing behind closed doors spawned a brave new world?

5 WILL SCHALKE AVOID THE DREADED DROP?

One of the biggest clubs in German football, an outfit with a huge fanbase, glorious past and tradition for a never-say-die mentality, the Gelsenkirchener will have to perform the mother of all recoveries if they are to avoid relegation from the Bundesliga for the first time since 1988.

In their opening 14 games this season, the Royal Blues could not muster a single victory (taking their winless run to 30 Bundesliga matches), costing the jobs of first David Wagner in September and then Manuel Baum in December.

Huub Stevens, who guided the club to safety in 2018-19, was put in temporary charge, but now ex-Tottenham manager Christian Gross has been installed – his first job in Europe for almost a decade. Every aspect of the club speaks imminent disaster: bare coffers, poor management decisions, unmotivated players looking for excuses and supporters in uproar.



Peter Pan... Ibrahimovic

6 CAN THE MILAN REVIVAL CONTINUE?

Ten years have passed since Milan last won the *Scudetto*, and only a few months ago coach Stefano Pioli was looking ripe for the axe. Yet the 55-year-old saved his job by stringing together a remarkable run of form that has continued into the new campaign and, after remaining unbeaten in the league throughout 2020 since lockdown, his team are well placed to end Juventus' dominance of Serie A.

Assuming that evergreen Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic stays fit and in form, anything is possible. The 39-year-old Peter Pan shone like a beacon in the first half of 2020-21, setting an example to his team-mates by providing goals, spectacle, combativeness and leadership.

Golden oldie... Quagliarella

7 CAN WE EXPECT MORE GOLDEN OLDIE EXPLOITS?

Thanks to strides in sports and medical science, beefed up back-up crews, better pitches and more rotation, 30 and 40-something pros have never had it so good. Hats off to the likes of Chelsea striker Olivier Giroud (34), Montpellier defender Vitorino Hilton (43), Bologna forward Rodrigo Palacio (38), Real Betis wing wizard Joaquin (39), Sampdoria front-man Fabio Quagliarella (37), Eintracht Frankfurt midfielder Makoto Hasebe (37) and many, many others. We're all benefitting from their extra few years in the sun.

8 CAN SCOTLAND SHINE AT EURO 2020?

About to take part in their first international tournament since the 1998 World Cup in France, the Scots may appear to be a workaday outfit on paper, only boasting a smattering of Grade A individuals. But write them off at your peril. In just a year-and-a-half in charge, manager Steve Clarke has pieced together a cohesive, hard-working unit with that happy knack of battling through against adversity. Belief and momentum are crucial commodities in football and after twice winning penalty shoot-outs in the play-offs, the feeling in the camp is that this is their time. Two Euro 2020 fixtures at home at Hampden Park and a tussle with the "Auld Enemy" England at Wembley will make for added psychological bonuses.

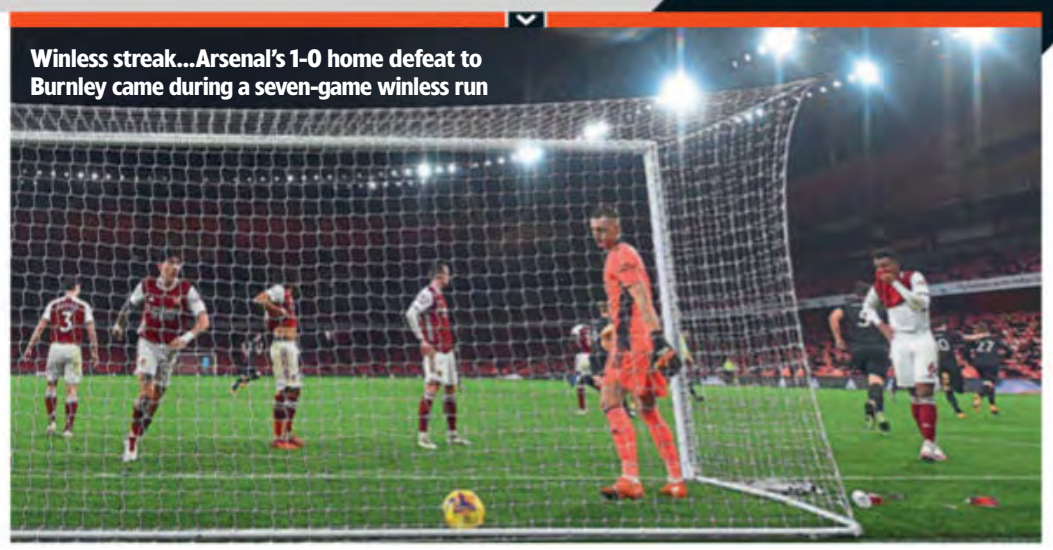
International wilderness... Thomas Muller

Ending the long wait...Scotland celebrate reaching Euro 2020

9 WILL THOMAS MULLER RETURN FOR GERMANY?

Coach Joachim Low won't have a job for much longer if he can't find a solution to Germany's alarming slump. But in Thomas Muller, he may have a saviour.

Discarded from the national team in March 2019, the Bayern star has been in the form of his life in 2020, playing a vital role in the Bavarians' treble-winning success, and he's not slowed down in the current campaign. With 100 caps, 38 international goals and five major tournaments under his belt, he offers a wealth of pedigree and experience in addition to his outstanding form.



Winless streak...Arsenal's 1-0 home defeat to Burnley came during a seven-game winless run

10 HAVE ARSENAL FINALLY TURNED THE CORNER?

The R-word was even mentioned among Arsenal fans after they took just eight points from their last 12 league games before Christmas, but wins versus Chelsea, Brighton and West Bromwich Albion to close out and then start the New Year saw them turn the tide. While relegation is unthinkable for a club that has been in the English top flight longer than any other (102 years), missing out on European football for the first time since 1995-96 would also be a failure.

It was then, in 1996, when Arsene Wenger was appointed, but the stability he installed has evaporated. Question marks hang over key figures: owner Stan Kroenke, who has overseen a sustained period of decline; technical director Edu, whose appointment in 2019 has failed to arrest the slide; and "super" agent Kia Joorabchian, perceived to have obtained an input into the club's transfer strategy.

Between them, these key decision-makers have inadequately dealt with the futures of several players, most notably William Saliba and Mesut Ozil, creating an inharmonious squad. Arsenal have some immensely talented young players in Bukayo Saka, Gabriel Martinelli and Kieran Tierney, and did tidy business last summer capturing Thomas Partey and Gabriel. If Mikel Arteta can rid the club of the bad apples and deadwood, the future will look eternally brighter.

11 WHAT WILL THE NETHERLANDS BRING TO EURO 2020?

The Dutch left a huge hole when they failed to qualify for Euro 2016 and World Cup 2018. How we missed those mythical tangerine jerseys, their classy, progressive style of play and the massed ranks of their orange-clad fans. Their current squad arguably is the strongest they have had for some time, featuring players of the calibre of Van Dijk, De Jong, Wijnaldum, Depay, Van de Beek and Bergwijn. Two worries: is new coach Frank de Boer up to the job? And will centre-back extraordinaire Virgil van Dijk recover from injury in time for the main event?

Netherlands...back in the big time

Returning... Blanc

12 IS QATAR A BREEDING GROUND FOR ELITE COAHES?

A great recent mystery was the total disappearance of Laurent Blanc who, since being sacked by PSG in 2016, had not worked at all. Until December that is, when the ex-France coach was appointed by Al-Rayyan.

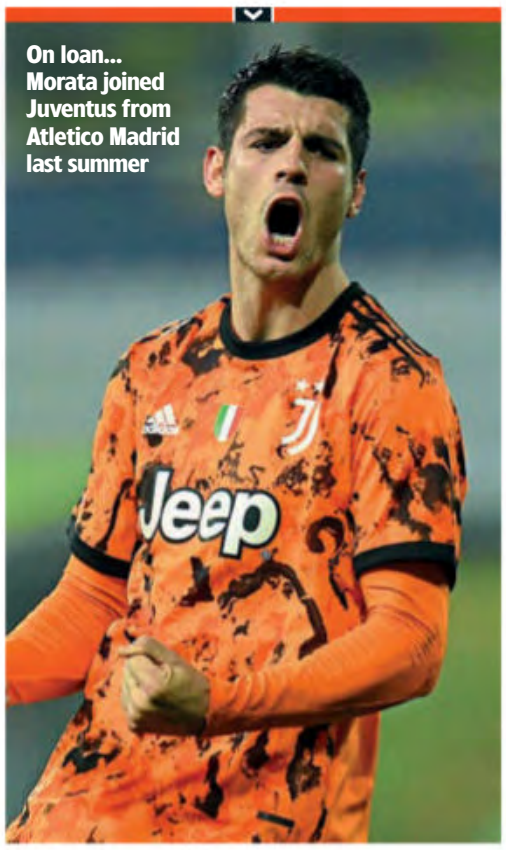
The Qatar Stars League may not be considered elite level, yet it is already home to a coach tipped for Champions League football in Xavi. If both Blanc and Xavi can land big jobs off the back of their exploits in the Middle East, other managerial wannabes could be tempted.

13 WHO WILL REAL MADRID PLUMP FOR: HAALAND OR MBAPPE?

In a perfect world, Real Madrid president Florentino Perez would like to bring in both these young starlets, showcasing them in what would be an irresistible front-line. But given the huge potential cost of the operation, Perez probably will prioritise Mbappe, who has never hidden his desire to play for *Los Blancos*.

Mbappe's current deal with PSG runs out in the summer of 2022, but sources in France say the Ligue 1 champions are enticing him to stay by attempting to lure Lionel Messi to the French capital.

However, until Mbappe puts pen to paper, Real are confident that PSG will be forced to offload the young ace this summer, and believe an offer around €190m will be enough to swing the deal.

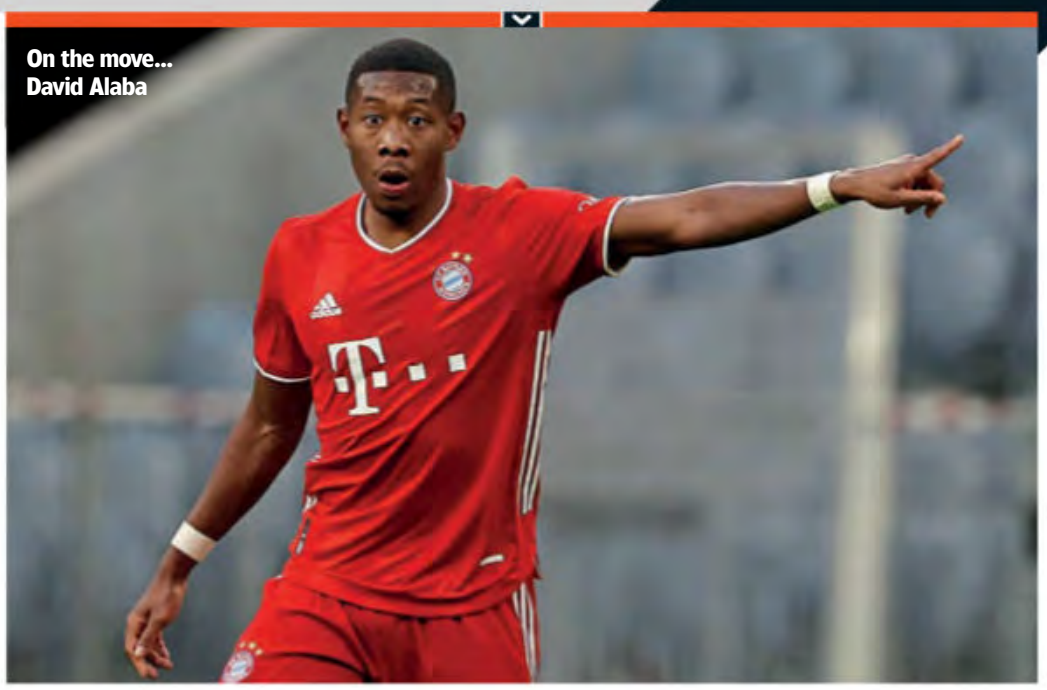


On loan... Morata joined Juventus from Atletico Madrid last summer

Mbappe or Haaland... the next Galactico?

14 WILL LOAN MOVES BE INCREASINGLY IN VOGUE?

With clubs hit hard in the pocket by the long-lasting effects of coronavirus, personnel costs will have to be reduced considerably and it makes perfect sense to spurn eight-figure permanent transfers for a far more affordable loan fee. In terms of risk versus reward, it's the obvious manoeuvre: bring in a good quality player for a year or two and then if it all works out, trigger a right-to-buy option. Even a club of the standing of Barcelona will have to extensively play the loan market. The Catalans are in a dire economic situation at the moment, in debt to the tune of €488m, including €200m of revenue lost to coronavirus.



On the move... David Alaba

16 HOW WILL BAYERN MUNICH REPLACE DAVID ALABA?

After the Austrian defender turned down another contract offer at the end of 2020, Bayern's focus has switched from convincing Alaba to stay to finding his replacement.

Those with their ear to the ground at the club claim the Bavarians' interest in RB Leipzig's French defender Dayot Upamecano has cooled, deterred by his mammoth €50 million release clause. Rumours abound that Bayern will look for an in-house solution instead, offering a chance to French youngster Tanguy Nianzou – who joined from PSG in July – or German Under-21 international Lars-Lukas Mai, who is currently on loan at second division Darmstadt.

17 WILL DEMBELE FINALLY SAY YES?

Talented but also injury-prone and erratic, Barcelona's French winger Ousmane Dembele is notoriously headstrong too. In each of the last two summers, the 23-year-old has been the man Barca cannot shift, twice refusing to play ball after deals were struck with Manchester United and PSG.

Dembele, who joined Barca from Dortmund for €105m in 2017, has never managed to nail down a permanent spot in the *Blaugrana* line-up. He is adamant he still has much to offer at the Nou Camp. Barca bosses are far less sure.

Unwanted... Dembele

Salary cap supporter... Karl-Heinz Rummenigge

15 IS A SALARY CAP THE ANSWER TO FINANCIAL WOES?

Clubs in the English third and fourth tiers recently adopted this American sports model – with total squad wages pegged at £2.5 million and £1.5 million respectively – and there may soon come a time when other leagues do likewise.

While EU competition rules makes such a ceiling highly problematic, many European football movers and shakers appear to be coming around to the idea. These include German federation chief Fritz Keller, Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, Cagliari president Tommaso Giulini and Bernard Caiazzo, a director at Saint-Etienne.

Time to shine... Hazard has just turned 30

18 IS BELGIUM COACH ROBERTO MARTINEZ RIGHT THAT 2021 WILL BE A "GREAT YEAR" FOR HIS SKIPPER HAZARD?

A good call, with one major caveat – that the highly-skilled winger stays fit and well. Since arriving at the Santiago Bernabeu in 2019 from Chelsea, Eden Hazard has missed over 30 games with injury, more than the sum total of his call-offs in seven years at Stamford Bridge. This season, he has only started a handful of matches for Real and contracted coronavirus in November. Let's hope the New Year brings better luck for the little Belgian ball-artist. The Red Devils captain deserves it.

CONOR COADY

"The goal against Wales is on repeat in our house"

The England defender talks about Wolves' rise, his former club Liverpool and Euro 2020…

The last three and a half seasons have been some ride for Wolverhampton Wanderers. It owes much to Nuno Espirito Santo. Just how good is he?
He is incredible. The club has completely changed direction since he arrived. It is testament to him and his staff that we've come so far in that short time. We knew the calibre of the man when he came in. He'd managed in the Champions League and it was an exciting opportunity for us all to improve and get better under his guidance.

It's not just what he's done for me as a player, but as a person. I've matured so much. I just need to keep listening to him and improving every day. That's what he does; he makes every one of us in the squad better.

When a big job becomes available we all have a bit of a panic! He deserves to be linked with the biggest sides because he is that good a coach. It's important we make the most of having him at our club. No one stays forever, but we are delighted he is with us now.

What has been your personal highlight of the rise and rise of Wolves?
There have been so many. The Championship-winning season was incredible, but to play in the Premier League is a dream. That was always my goal when I moved to Wolves because it's a big club with a fantastic fan base. So many teams struggle when they go up, but we just seemed to thrive.

Qualifying for the Europa League and then getting into the quarter-finals on the back of a first season in the Premier League was an amazing achievement. We were beaten by Sevilla but they were a top, top team that went on and won it. That was a sad moment, but when you look back now it's been quite some journey.

Having established yourselves in the top half of the Premier League, what is the next step for Wolves?
We don't set objectives, but it would be a dream come true to win a trophy with Wolves. That would be incredible. I can only imagine the emotion of that, but there's no point putting unwanted pressure on yourself. We've never done that before and it's served us well.

Everyone wants to play in the Champions League too, but there are so many quality teams in the Premier League, that we'd be a bit arrogant to set that as a target. I think we have to look at ourselves and make sure we are improving. If we are doing that, we are going in the right direction.

You signed a new deal with Wolves, but there was speculation involving your old club, Liverpool…
I know people will find it hard to believe because I grew up there, but it's not entered my head. I just love everything about being at Wolves: the manager, the fans and my team-mates. I think in life, when you come across something as special as this, it's very hard to move away from it. I've got so much gratitude for what this football club has done for me. I have no regrets with how my career has gone. I left one of the biggest clubs in the world to establish myself in a first team and then I found Wolves. Every time I play for this club is an honour. I'm proud to be the captain of this team. We aren't just team-mates, we are great friends in that dressing room.

One man who has gone from Wolves to Liverpool is Diogo Jota. Are you surprised he's become so important to their attack?
No, because I know his quality as a player. When he moved a lot of people were texting ➤

5
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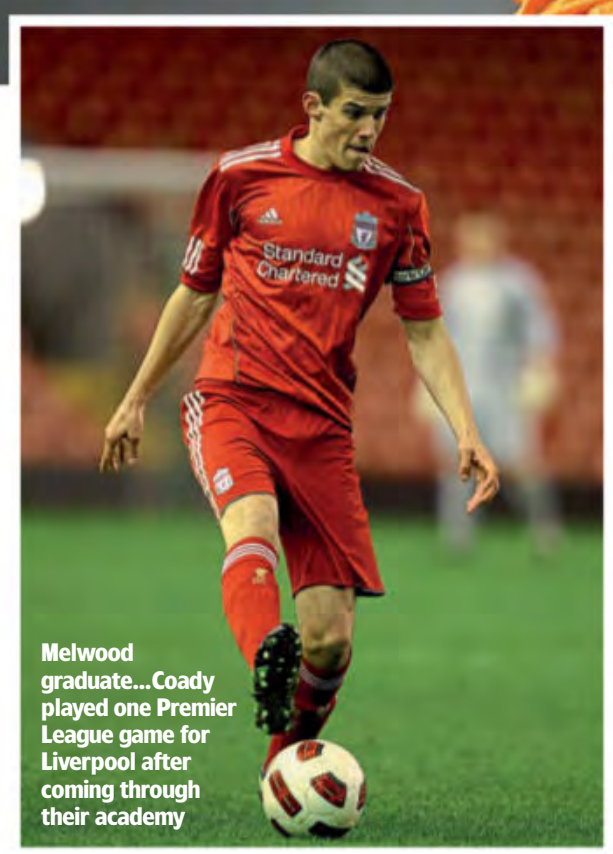
Wolves hero... Coady has been at the heart of Wolves' rise



Melwood graduate...Coady played one Premier League game for Liverpool after coming through their academy

me to ask what he's like. The biggest compliment I can pay him is that he has an incredible mentality. He has such a strong desire to win, to score goals and play well for his team. I knew that he wouldn't want to be a back-up to anyone. I expect him to be a massive success.

From our point of view, whenever you lose anyone of Diogo's calibre, you are going to miss them. He was great for us, but football moves on.

Your form for Wolves has led to England recognition. At the age of 27, did you wonder if it would happen?

I've dreamed about it all of my life. I represented my country at various levels as a kid and it was a massive honour. Over the years, I saw other lads from my age group playing in the Premier League every week and getting full England caps, so you do wonder if the chance has gone.

My career path has been different. They were ready but I wasn't, and I had to drop down a league. I had to learn more about football, get better and become a man. It's been a great journey and I wouldn't change any of it.

Even now, I can't really put into words how I felt when I got that call from the manager. Walking out with that shirt on and singing the national anthem – it was everything I thought it was going to be and more. My wife videos my kids watching their Dad play for his country – and the goal against Wales is on repeat in our house! I don't need to watch because I'll never forget it. Being involved with England is just amazing and a very proud achievement for me and my family.

What is the England manager Gareth Southgate like to deal with?

I can't speak more highly of him, but it's not just the way he is with me. You see him speaking with the others and the way he handles the media and different situations that arise. He's absolutely fantastic.

Do you already feel very much a part of the England group?

I'll never take anything for granted. I have to see how the season goes and keep playing well for Wolves. The England manager, the staff and the players all make you feel so welcome and get you involved right away. There are some truly world-class players in the squad, so to go and share a pitch with them is a real privilege.

I'm 27, but I'm still learning from these

Leaders...Nuno Espirito Santo with his club captain

players. It was obviously fantastic to be called up for the November internationals, but then it became an absolute nightmare having to leave the camp early [due to injury]. Hopefully, I can earn more chances in the future.

England got to the World Cup semi-finals with a back three and Southgate still sees it as an option. Does that work in your favour for the Euros?
I'll do anything to help the England team. If it's a back four and I'm called upon, then great. If it's a back three, I offer some experience because I've played the system for years. Other clubs play different formations so maybe that's an area I can contribute, but we are talking about world-class players who have won leagues and Champions Leagues. They can all adapt. As long as I can be useful to the cause, I'll be happy.

Do you feel that if you maintain form with Wolves you'll be in that squad in the summer?
To go to a major tournament with England representing Wolves would be amazing, but I just need to keep focusing on my club, listening to our manager every day and keep looking to improve. I've not thought about going to the Euros because I don't want to put unwanted pressure on myself. It's not something I've done in the past and I won't start now.

"I know people will find it hard to believe because I grew up there, but [re-joining Liverpool] has not entered my head"

What do you think of England's group: Croatia, Scotland and the Czech Republic? It's surely a great incentive to know that Wembley is a major venue...
Any player would tell you it would mean everything for them to be involved there. It's a great group of teams and there will be some interesting battles. It's not often a competitive tournament comes around where some games are on home soil. It really is goose-bump stuff. You just hope the world is in a better place with the pandemic because the atmosphere around the country should be electric.

How far can England go and who will be the main contenders this summer?
We've got world-class players and a fantastic manager so you'd hope the group can go far. I've got the experience of training and playing with them now, but also know their quality from facing a lot of them in the Premier League.

It's hard to make predictions now, as you don't know who will be in each country's squad, but we should be confident in ourselves given the lads who could be pulling on an England shirt. You'd expect the usual suspects to be pushing for the trophy. There are some amazing countries involved and it's going to be a really exciting tournament.

Interview by Paul Hassall

"Absolutely fantastic"... Coady is a fan of Southgate

Top of the world... Belgium have been top of the FIFA world rankings since 2018

CLIMBING THE LADDER

Steve Menary examines the issues with changes to the FIFA rankings

Since being introduced in December 1992, the FIFA World Ranking has routinely been the subject of controversy. In nearly three decades, only eight teams have topped the list: Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and most recently, Belgium, who unlike their predecessors have never won a senior international trophy.

This sort of anomaly is why the rankings are questioned, but the system is most contentious with countries lower down.

"A couple of years ago it was easier with a few good results and regular matches during FIFA dates to climb up faster for the lower-ranked teams," says German coach Michael Weiss, who has coached the Philippines and left Mongolia in January 2020. "At the time if you beat, for instance, a team ranked ten or 20 places higher you would automatically jump ten spots up.

"In my case in Mongolia, we reached several milestones during my three years and got results in Malaysia, Laos and Cambodia, and beat Myanmar at home. Myanmar were 130th in the rankings but we only moved up a few spots. Ten years ago a victory for a 190th-placed team versus 130th would have meant a minimum of ten or 15 spots up."

Research by website *We Global Football*, which analyses football ratings, shows that half of the teams on the FIFA rankings have moved six places or fewer in the last two years.

"It's almost impossible to climb the FIFA rankings and it's affecting every country that is lower ranked," agrees Tom Saintfiet, the well-travelled Belgian coach, who has managed all over the world and took over the Gambia in July 2018.

"Since 2018, they've changed the FIFA rankings so that you can win fewer points if you win a friendly. Before it depended on how strong your opponent was and if it was home and away, but now the points are worth much less."

Prior to 2018, the world rankings were calculated using a points system that allocated average points for each game, including friendly matches. This system prioritised qualifiers, and countries that did well in those games could protect their ranking by avoiding friendlies.

As the system averaged out points, playing and losing a friendly, particularly at home to a lower ranked side, hit the ranking. So, countries playing fewer friendlies benefited more than those looking to actually play more games.

In 2017, Poland and Switzerland were in the top five after only playing a single friendly in the previous year. Wales were ranked as high as eighth in October 2015 following a 17-month break from friendlies.

There was a different problem in Asia, where two thirds of the countries are outside the top 100. Steve Darby, who has managed Thailand and coached Laos from 2015 to 2016, explains: "When I was with Laos, the world rankings had started to become important as people realised that seedings in tournaments relied upon them. It became possible for smart administrators to plot their friendlies to try to gain a better seedings via the rankings.

"Laos found it difficult. It was economically more attractive to have Thailand at home with low costs and a full house but probably get beat, than to travel to Nepal and win but face massive air fares.

"Another danger was that it opened an avenue for match-fixers to arrange friendlies under this guise and manipulate the results."

Friendlies were being fixed in Asia, Africa and also Europe, such as the 2011 matches in Turkey between Bolivia and Latvia, and Estonia and Bulgaria.

FIFA took action and in 2018 changed the rankings to reduce the value of friendlies and boost competitive games, particularly at major championships. The new system was based on an independent system, called the Elo ratings, but with crucial differences.

Ed Jagers, a Dutch software analyst, who runs an independent website, *Football-Rankings.info*, explains: "This system is a zero-sum calculation method where for each played match, points are exchanged from the losing team to the winning team. [But] FIFA disregarded the home advantage. It is widely known that, especially in national team football, home advantage plays a role in the determination of a match result. Studies showed that it determines some 6% of the match result, while in club football it only determines some 4%.

"FIFA also disregarded the goal difference and uses lower weights than Elo for corresponding match types."

When the new system started, the Nations League began in Europe and CONCACAF to replace friendlies staged in fallow years, when there was no World Cup or continental qualifying, but Nations League qualifiers carry only marginally more points than friendlies.

In contrast, the Elo system offers 20 points for a friendly win and 40 points for a continental qualifier.

"This explains why the FIFA ranking is much less volatile than Elo," adds Jagers, who says that the biggest difference is the approach to points won in the final stages of major tournaments.

He explains: "FIFA defined exemptions from the zero-sum approach: for matches played in the knockout stages of continental or World Cup final tournaments a team can't lose points anymore. The points exchanged are calculated normally but they are not subtracted. This means a huge advantage for teams reaching those knockout stages.

"That's partly why Belgium, France and Brazil are so far in front points wise of the rest of the current top ten in the ranking. This also makes changes at the very top of the ranking quite rare."

Gaming the system... Poland achieved their highest ranking by avoiding friendlies

Friendly...Wales hosted the USA in November

In contrast, the Elo system is much more representative of performances, particularly amongst the smaller nations. For example, Tom Saintfiet's Gambia have produced a string of impressive results against significantly higher-ranked opponents since he started in 2018. These include victories over Benin, Angola and Gabon, and two draws with Algeria in Africa Cup of Nations qualifying, and a friendly victory over 2018 World Cup finalists Morocco.

In the FIFA rankings, Gambia are 157th – four places behind Eswatini, who have not won any form of international for more than 20 matches. But in the corresponding Elo rankings, Gambia are 114th and Eswatini are 177th.

With smaller countries such as Mongolia, Laos or Gambia less likely to reach later stages of continental finals, improving their FIFA ranking to get a better seeding is now harder and the transition to the new system has not helped.

"The strange thing is that they kept the previous points from the old system," says Tom Saintfiet, who adds: "Probably this rule was created to keep the big teams higher up the FIFA rankings and countries like the USA and Netherlands to go to the big tournaments. Remember, in the last tournament they were not there."

Well-travelled...Tom Saintfiet has coached several lower-ranked countries

> "It's almost impossible to climb the FIFA rankings and it's affecting every country that is lower ranked"
>
> **Tom Saintfiet, Gambia coach**

While this was perhaps the only fair way of making the change, for countries that were higher up the rankings in 2018 staying there – and guaranteeing a better seeding – is easier.

All this is why smaller countries, bogged down by the current system, are unable to make any significant moves up the FIFA rankings. In the reduced window for friendlies, particularly in Europe and CONCACAF, countries are also looking up the rankings for opponents to the frustration of their managers.

"Bigger countries are not going to play smaller countries in friendlies," says St. Lucia coach Jamaal Shabazz. "If it's without dictating too much there must be some method to allow smaller countries to get that opportunity. Even if it is to be used as target practice.

"I think if once in two years a smaller ranked country with ambition is allowed a friendly against a powerhouse, it gives you an indication of how far you've got to improve physically technically and tactically."

The consequences of the changes mean that not only are smaller countries unable to challenge themselves, but making significant moves up the rankings is almost unachievable.

Michael Weiss adds: "For lower-ranked teams it's very difficult as they really need to participate in all FIFA designed periods and need victories against stronger teams, preferably away, which is difficult to achieve as most lower-ranked teams mostly start preparation late for certain prestigious tournaments."

FIFA says its aim with the new rankings is to encourage teams that perform well in major championships, particularly at the finals. A FIFA spokesperson explains: "The main aim of the new formula that was introduced in August 2018 was to identify an algorithm that is not only intuitive, easy to understand and improves overall accuracy, but also addressed feedback received about the previous model and provides fair and equal opportunities for all teams across all confederations to ascend the FIFA Ranking."

With no prospect of another revision, smaller nations are likely to be left permanently lagging behind their bigger rivals in the FIFA rankings.

FIFA ranking explained

The method of calculation adds/subtracts points for individual matches to/from a team's existing points total. Points added or subtracted are partially determined by the two teams' relative strength, including the expectation that teams higher in the rankings should fare better against lower-ranked sides.

- **5pts** Friendly match outside FIFA window
- **10pts** Friendly match inside FIFA window
- **15pts** Group match in Nations League
- **25pts** Play-off and finals of Nations League
- **25pts** Qualification for regional tournaments (Euros, AFCON, etc.) and World Cup
- **35pts** Regional finals up to quarter-final
- **40pts** Regional finals from quarter-final
- **50pts** World Cup finals up to quarter-final
- **60pts** World Cup finals from quarter-final

Steve Menary

Frustrated... St. Lucia head coach Jamaal Shabazz

Words Jamie Evans

Michael OLISE

In a sentence
Another Jude Bellingham: an exciting, skilful, teenage midfielder impressing in the Championship.

What they say
"For a player of that age and quality, you've got to say he's worth £30 million-£40 million now."
Former Reading defender Matt Mills

"Michael is super talented, but he also has to keep learning. We all see huge potential in him."
Reading manager Veljko Paunovic

The story so far
2020 saw the likes of Jude Bellingham, Eberechi Eze, Ollie Watkins and Said Benrahma leave the Championship for huge fees, and Olise is being tipped to follow them in 2021.

The 19-year-old first arrived in England for trials at Chelsea and then Manchester City, but failed to earn a contract with either before joining Reading's academy in 2016. He made his full debut in the second half of 2018-19 and his progress continued into the following campaign, but this season he has really shone in a Reading side that is outperforming expectations, fighting for promotion to the Premier League.

The attacking-midfielder plays with a style that is highly pleasing on the eye, with balance, poise and flair. He is capable of gliding past defenders or beating them with a trick, combined with a left foot that can slice open defences. At the start of December, no teenager in the Championship or Europe's top five leagues had created as many chances as him.

The next step
The long list of prestigious European clubs that have been linked with Olise is testament to how highly rated he is. Some reports say Reading have slapped a £40 million price tag on his head, while others suggest he has an £8 million release clause. It is likely that the FA will attempt to enlist him for international duty as well.

Strengths
Having spent the season at the top of the Championship assist charts, creativity is a clear strength, as is his versatility to play out wide or as a No.10 behind the front-line.

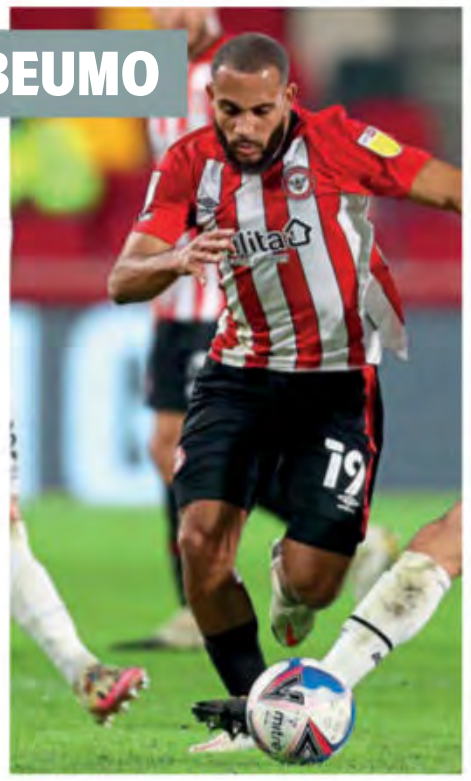
Weaknesses
More goals will come with maturity, as will discipline; he has been guilty of petulant yellow cards this season.

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT OLISE

- In 2019, Olise played for France Under-18s at the Toulon Tournament, playing in group-stage victories over Guatemala and Qatar.
- In spite of those appearances, he is also eligible to play international football for England and Nigeria.
- His younger brother Richard is also a young footballer, playing as a defender in Chelsea's academy.

> "Michael is super talented...we all see huge potential in him"
> Reading manager Veljko Paunovic

Bryan MBEUMO



Brentford
Mbeumo was a part of the thrilling Brentford front-line that came so close to promotion in 2019-20. Yet while the other members of the Bees' attacking trident – Benrahma and Watkins – were snapped up by Premier League sides, Mbeumo stayed. The Frenchman scored 16 goals last season, yet this campaign he has mainly turned provider for prolific new boy Ivan Toney.

Nico MELAMED

Espanyol
Melamed fits the mould of the finest Spanish midfielders: diminutive, nimble and accomplished technically. The 19-year-old grew up just outside Barcelona, and joined Espanyol's academy at 11. Last season he was a B team regular, scoring seven goals in the Spanish third tier and earning a first-team debut in June. He was powerless to prevent them being relegated, yet has caught the eye of some big clubs.

Janis ANTISTE

Toulouse
There is a well-worn cliché that being relegated allows a club to refresh with a raft of new players, but with Toulouse there is some truth to it. Leading the line for them this season has been the 18-year-old Antiste, who scored six goals in his first 13 games of the season. He is highly rated thanks to his natural predatory instincts, and is developing well in Ligue 2.

Bright OSAYI-SAMUEL

Queens Park Rangers
While Eberechi Eze has been impressing in the Premier League, terrorising full-backs for fun at Crystal Palace, his replacement at Loftus Road has been doing exactly the same thing in the Championship. At the start of December, nobody had completed more dribbles in the English second tier than the 23-year-old, and he is catching the eye of several scouts.

Antoine SEMENYO

Bristol City
Recruited from a local college at the age of 17, Semenyo is an extremely raw talent that can occasionally lack tactical knowledge and decision-making. Yet in terms of ability, few in the Championship can match him. He has both the pace and bullish strength to shrug off defenders, and is happiest when running at them with the ball at his feet. Remarkably two-footed, he has been a key figure in City's attack this season, demonstrating why Chelsea tried to sign him in 2019.

Alex CENTELLES

Almeria
Valencia's academy has produced a long line of outstanding Spanish left-backs, including Jordi Alba, Juan Bernat, Alex Grimaldo and Jose Gaya, and Centelles hopes to add his name to that list having left the Mestalla in October. Tall, strong and quick, the Spain Under-19 international impressed on loan at Famalicao in Portugal last season, while this campaign he is helping Almeria push for a return to La Liga.

Tyrese CAMPBELL

Stoke City
Son of ex-Arsenal and Everton striker Kevin, Campbell's development had been accelerating this season before a serious knee injury ruled him out for the rest of the campaign. Unlike his old man, Tyrese plays as a winger rather than through the middle – allowing him to rack up both goals and assists – and he was topping both charts for his club this season before his cruel injury in December.

6 of the best

African diamonds

African talent is now abundant in the top leagues of Europe – **Mark Gleeson** runs his eye over the stars who have been making waves this season

1 Amad DIALLO

MANCHESTER UNITED

The teenager only featured as a substitute for Atalanta in a season and a half in the first team, yet still managed some Champions League minutes, a Serie A goal and a big move to Manchester United.

His Serie A debut came in October 2019 after Atalanta had gone 6-1 up against Udinese, and Gian Piero Gasperini thought it appropriate to give the then 17-year-old Ivorian some playing time in the last 15 minutes. Traore responded with a dribbling slalom down the right flank, before cutting in to score a seventh with a blistering left-footed shot – becoming the first player born in 2002 to score in Serie A.

He moved to Italy as a youngster, grew up in Parma and was signed by Atalanta aged 13. His elder brother Hamed Traore plays for Sassuolo on loan from Empoli.

2 Lassina TRAORE

AJAX

Five goals in a record-breaking 13-0 victory for Ajax against VVV-Venlo earlier in the Eredivisie campaign catapulted Traore to the fore, but it is the injury to the Brazilian Antony that has granted him more playing time to profit from.

Long earmarked for success after being spotted in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, Ajax parked Traore at their affiliate club in Cape Town until he turned 18, and then tied him down to a lengthy contract in the Netherlands. The impetuosity of youth is still evident in the number of good opportunities squandered, but his physical presence and willingness to work will see Ajax surely make a good profit off him when the time comes to move up to a bigger league.

3 El Bilal TOURE
REIMS

The attacking powerhouse is already cemented in the Mali national team's starting line-up, and is beginning to make an impact on Ligue 1 as well.

Reims have him tied down on a five-year contract and on his debut last January, Toure asked to take a penalty that he had won, converted it, and subsequently become the club's youngest goalscorer in a half century.

Born in the Ivory Coast to immigrant parents, he moved back to Mali at the age of 15 and was in the team that won the African Under-20 Championship in 2019. He has worked hard to become more of a bustling striker, using his body as much as his technical ability to lead the line and create chances.

4 KAMALDEEN Sulemana
NORDSJAELLAND

Simply known as Kamaldeen, the talented 18-year-old winger came through the Right to Dream academy in Ghana and made an immediate impact after signing a five-year deal in Denmark in January 2020.

Nordsjaelland head coach Flemming Pedersen says the creative dribbler has the potential to be an "African Neymar," and his mazy skills and finishing prowess (eight goals in his first 24 league games) suggest that may not be too hyperbolic.

An international debut last October in a friendly against Mali has marked him out among a new generation of Ghanaians with the ability to see their country dominate African football in the near future.

5 Odilon KOSSOUNOU
CLUB BRUGGE

A positive COVID-19 test for regular centre-back Brandon Mechele allowed Kossounou to get a starting berth with Belgian champions Club Brugge, and the talented teenager seized his chance, becoming a regular in the back-line.

Now just turned 20, he has turned around his profile after initially proving unconvincing when joining from Swedish side Hammarby in 2019.

Coaches have worked hard on his positioning, moving him from right-back to centre-back, while encouraging his aggression. Playing in the Champions League group phase has been a massive boost to his confidence and since the return of international football last October, Kossounou has collected four caps for his country, the Ivory Coast.

6 Silas WAMANGITUKA
STUTTGART

Seven goals in his first 12 games in the Bundesliga have allowed the Congolese to pick up where he left off last campaign, where his goals helped Stuttgart win a place back in the German top flight.

One of them earned him a booking for "disrespect" after he walked the ball into the net versus Werder Bremen, earning him headlines for the wrong reason. Last season he had also been pegged as "flashy", but the pacy striker – originally from Kinshasa via France's fifth tier – has found German football to his liking. Speed is his primary commodity but he is also maturing and improving quickly too. Has a bright future.

Glenn Moore

The rise of Manchester United Women

In only their second-ever WSL season, the Red Devils are leading the title race

At the start of 2018 Manchester United's women's team did not even exist. By the end of 2020 they were England's top club, four points clear in the Women's Super League. Even given United's resources it has been a meteoric rise, though for Casey Stoney, the manager, "it isn't about December, it is about May. There is a long way to go and a lot of games to play."

Stoney, 38, won 130 England caps and spent the best part of two decades in the top flight with Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Charlton and Lincoln, twice winning the title. One of the reasons she never played for United was that the club disbanded their women's team, which was amateur and played in the lower divisions, in 2005, soon after the Glazer family bought the club. The new owners declared the team "unprofitable" and "not part of the core business."

A dozen years later, with the WSL thriving and England having reached successive tournament semi-finals, the women's game began to look as if it could be profitable. United, meanwhile, were encountering increasing criticism for their stand, the lack of a female team cast in sharp relief by Manchester City's successful investment.

So, in May 2018, United announced they were forming a women's team. At the time Stoney was England's assistant manager, working under former United men's player Phil Neville. "I heard about the opportunity through Phil," she told *World Soccer*. "I never expected to get the job. When I heard I'd got it all the cogs were going about how I was going to do things. I went to the London office and met [CEO] Ed Woodward, explained my vision for the women's team, and gained an understanding of how the club were going to support me."

Though in pole position to succeed Neville with the Lionesses it was an opportunity Stoney knew she had to seize. She did so because "of the history, the scale of the club, and that it was going to be a blank canvas – I was going to get to build this club from the bottom up. They knew I knew women's football better than they did and they allowed me to just get on with it. It was a unique opportunity you never get in football."

Stoney was able to handpick all her staff and players, and decide the philosophy and environment. It was like running her own fantasy football team. The catch was she had ten weeks to recruit and bed all them in before the start of the season. With a licensing round providing a chance to leapfrog the lower levels United opted to start in the second tier Championship, giving the team a chance to settle. But the expectation was immediate promotion.

> "I was going to get to build this club from the bottom up… It was a unique opportunity you never get in football"
>
> Manchester United manager Casey Stoney

Stoney began by bringing back some of the talent which had left. When United disbanded their women's team they maintained their girls' programme, thought to be a requirement of having a boy's academy. Back came players such as Katie Zelem (Juventus), Millie Turner (Bristol City) and Ella Toone (Manchester City). All were young, as were recruits Leah Galton, Jess Sigsworth and Lauren James (brother of Chelsea defender Reece). To provide experienced leadership Stoney raided Liverpool for England internationals Siobhan Chamberlain, Alex Greenwood and Amy Turner. "I wanted a young team that I felt we could develop, coach and could get promotion in the first year," she said.

United won their first match against Aston Villa 12-0 and romped to promotion. Based at Leigh Sports Village, a 12,000-capacity venue west of Manchester shared with rugby league's Leigh Centurions, they quickly attracted a strong and vocal fanbase.

Having begun the campaign with a stylish video launch, they ended it with a trip to China for Stoney and several players on behalf of a United sponsor, flying first class. "Manchester United," said Stoney, "just did things differently."

For their first season in the top flight Stoney added more experience in Dutch midfielder Jackie Groenen and England defender Abbie McManus. Focusing on a solid defence with a leavening of attacking flair United came fourth – "the best of the rest" behind the big three of

Comeback…United celebrate their equaliser against Manchester City

Manager… Casey Stoney

Chelsea, City and Arsenal.

Last summer they added depth and class, notably in the form of American World Cup winners Tobin Heath and Christen Press, hired, said Stoney, for their "winning mentality" and the example they would set as well as their ability. Heath has been more influential than the injury-and-illness-hit Press, but both have raised the team's profile Stateside with United struggling to keep pace with demand for replica shirts.

However, it is notable that the homegrown core remains with many of the original squad, including Zelem, the Turners and Toone, regular starters this season.

Having held champions Chelsea on the opening day, United won five matches, including a 1-0 defeat of Arsenal, then came back from a 2-0 deficit in the Manchester derby to draw 2-2. Three more wins sent them into the Christmas break four points clear of Arsenal with Chelsea two points further adrift, albeit with two games in hand.

Stoney revealed their progress has been quicker than anticipated and added claiming one of the three Champions League qualifying places remains this year's prime target. "If I compare our budgets to some of the others we probably shouldn't [win the title] so it won't be a failure [if we don't]," she said. Then she added: "But there is a winning mindset in that dressing room. We will fight every game to finish as high as we can."

Round-up

Close shave...Juventus almost caused an upset

LYON GIVEN MAJOR FRIGHT IN EUROPE

Holders Lyon twice trailed in their Champions League round of 32 first leg with Juventus before taking the match 3-2 and the tie 6-2 on aggregate. Glasgow City, quarter-finalists last season, lost to Sparta Prague while Slavia Prague went out to a 95th-minute goal from Fiorentina. Chelsea and Manchester City progressed with big wins versus Benfica and Kopparbergs/Goteborg respectively. The last 16 draw is in February.

Star performer... Barca's Caroline Graham Hansen

POWER SHIFT IN FRANCE AND GERMANY...

Lyon have won the last 14 French titles and Wolfsburg the last four in Germany, but going into the winter break they both trailed to Paris Saint-Germain and Bayern Munich respectively. PSG had only dropped points in a draw at third-place Bordeaux, whose Jamaican striker Khadija Shaw was leading scorer (14 goals). Bayern Munich, after four successive seasons as runners-up, have a dozen straight wins.

...BUT NOT IN SPAIN AND ITALY

Champions Barcelona and Juventus led their respective leagues at the break. Barca were two points clear in Spain with a 100 per cent record, three games in hand and a 57-2 goal difference. Caroline Graham Hansen was the standout player with four goals and nine assists. Heading the chase were new old rivals Real Madrid, in their debut season. Also on a perfect ten victories, Juve had a three-point lead over Milan in Italy, spearheaded by 11-goal striker Cristiana Girelli.

Departing... Shelley Kerr

KERR LEAVES SCOTS

After Scotland's failure to qualify for Euro 2022 manager Shelley Kerr stood down. She had been in the post for four years.

FEW STARS IN AUSTRALIAN LEAGUE

A low-key W-League began in late December, shorn of many Matildas and National Women's Soccer League stars due, respectively, to players moving to England and a schedule clash.

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CONCACAF Champions League

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

Mexico on top once again

Tigres extend the dominance of the competition by Mexican clubs

Just over 20 years ago, a young girl named Britney Spears turned the world of pop music upside down. In movies, *American Beauty* won the Academy Award with the best performance of Kevin Spacey's career. Mark Zuckerberg had not yet entered college and the Twin Towers still dominated the New York skyline.

It was the year 2000, and LA Galaxy had just won the MLS' second CONCACAF Champions League in three years. Added to the victory of the US national team over Mexico in the last 16 at the 2002 World Cup, everything seemed to indicate that there would be a definitive changing of the guard in the confederation.

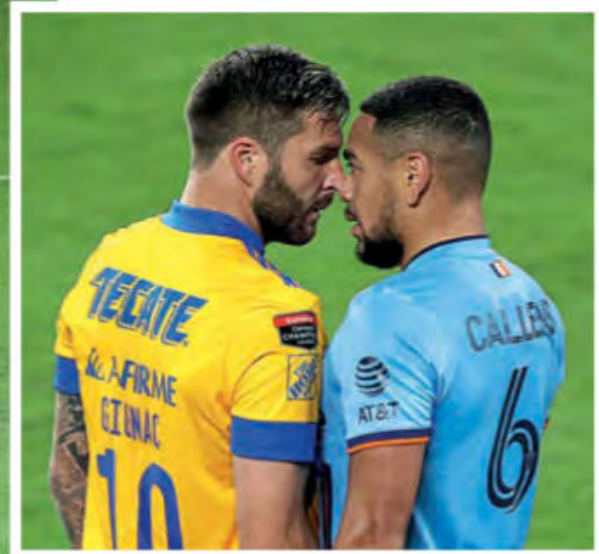
It was a mirage. Two decades have passed and MLS haven't won the regional tournament again. On the contrary, during that 20-year span, they had to watch their LigaMX arch-rivals clinch 14 consecutive titles, the largest dominance of a regional tournament by a country in any confederation, in football history.

2020, however, threatened to be different. One side, LAFC, seemed to have found the remedy for the league's woes in the regional tournament. One year earlier, they had signed one of the best players their arch-rivals had produced in recent times: Carlos Vela. With the mercurial playmaker in scintillating form, they seriously threatened to finally break the inexhaustible Mexican streak.

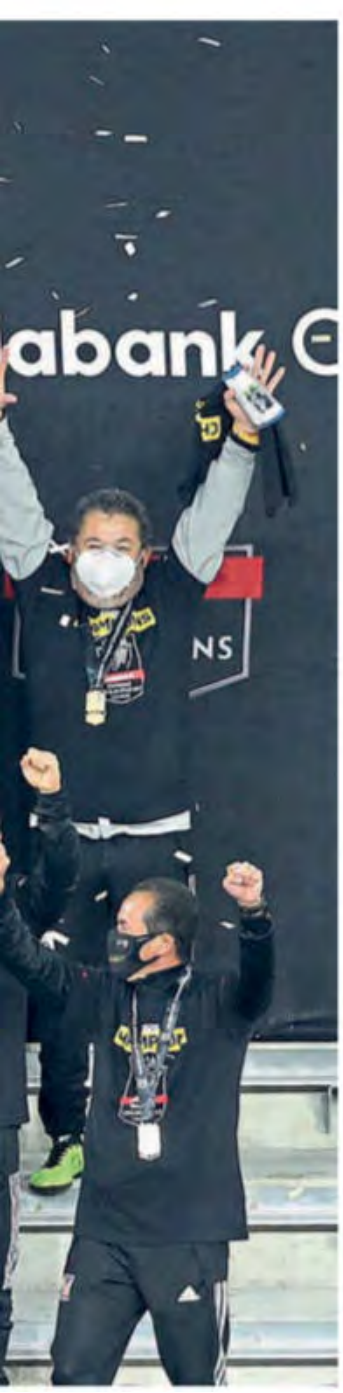
Spearheaded by Vela's inventiveness, the Black and Gold saw off LigaMX rivals one by one in the competition. In the round of 16 they eliminated Leon (who, a few months later, would become Mexican champions) by erasing a 2-0 defeat in the first leg in Mexico

Winners...Tigres lift their first-ever CONCACAF Champions League trophy

Opener...Rossi scores in the final for LAFC



Head-to-head... Andre-Pierre Gignac and NYCFC's Alexander Callens square up in the quarter-final



with an emphatic 3-0 victory in LA.

That was way before the pandemic interrupted, forcing the final rounds of the tournament to be played in the third week of December, at a single venue – Orlando, Florida. Yet the "*Angelinos*" kept pace, deservedly defeating two of Mexico's "Big Four" teams – America and Cruz Azul – in the quarter-finals and semi-finals.

Their rivals in the final, however, would be a completely different animal. Winners of four LigaMX titles in the last five years, Tigres can perfectly be considered the team of the decade in Mexico. The only title that had escaped them in that period was the CONCACAF Champions League, and with a core made up of numerous Latin American internationals and spearheaded by the excellent French striker Andre-Pierre Gignac, the team from the city of Monterrey saw this edition as their golden opportunity to finally get the title that eluded them for so long.

Despite this, when the time came, for three quarters of the match, it looked like LAFC were going to achieve the feat. After controlling their dangerous rivals in the first half, the Americans managed to open the scoring on the hour mark when their Uruguayan starlet, Diego Rossi, exquisitely finished a Mark-Anthony Kaye through ball, lobbing it over Tigres' Argentinian goalkeeper Nahuel Guzman.

Five minutes later, Vela had the chance to seal the match, but crashed his shot into Tigres defender Luis Rodriguez, when he seemed to have an open net to finish. That miss completely changed the momentum of the match.

Tigres can perfectly be considered the team of the decade in Mexico

From that minute on, the Mexican side took complete control of the game, and one of the biggest differences between LigaMX and MLS was highlighted. While Tigres have a group of seasoned veterans, most of LAFC's players had almost no experience in international competitions, and at the moment of maximum pressure, it showed.

In the 70th minute, former Mexico international Hugo Ayala headed in a corner at the near post to tie the score, and in the 84th minute, Gignac broke LAFC fans' hearts by finishing from just outside the box following an excellent run by Rodriguez. Just like that, the American dream was over.

Tigres will thus travel to Qatar to be the CONCACAF representative in the Club World Cup in February, and with their victory they extend the dominance of Mexican clubs in the CONCACAF Champions League to 15 consecutive editions, to the delight of the fans and the Mexican press, who greatly celebrated the triumph of their representative in Orlando on social networks.

Those same social networks did not exist 20 years ago. Today, Britney Spears is no longer the world's top pop star, Kevin Spacey has been cast off from Hollywood under a cloud, and the One World Trade Center rises in the place where the iconic Twin Towers once stood.

Yet, as so many things have changed between 2000 and 2020, one has not. Despite LAFC's valiant effort, an MLS side still has not been able to break the LigaMX dominance and take home the CONCACAF Champions League. And that will linger, once again, in everyone's minds as they try yet again to break the curse when the competition restarts in a couple of months.

Match winner... Gignac celebrates scoring Tigres' second goal

AFC Champions League

JOHN DUERDEN

Ulsan crowned champions of Asia

Marathon tournament finally comes to an end in Qatar almost a year after it began

Winner...Junior Negrao nets the decisive second goal from the penalty spot

South Korea's Ulsan Hyundai ended a difficult year by defeating Persepolis of Iran 2-1 in the final of the AFC Champions League on December 19 in Doha, Qatar.

Goals number six and seven in the tournament from joint-top scorer Brazilian striker, Junior Negrao, also the leading goal-getter in the 2020 K League, gave Ulsan what was a deserved win after Persepolis had taken the lead.

It also gave the Tigers a second Asian title to add to the first won in 2012. For Persepolis it is a second final defeat in three years and the Tehran club, one of the best supported on the continent, are still waiting for a first Asian crown. Iran have been waiting since 1993 when Pas won the old Asian Club Championship.

That fact rankles in the football-mad country but at least the 2020 AFC

Review

Champions... Ulsan Hyundai lift the trophy

Fans...some supporters were allowed inside the ground, alongside cardboard cutouts

Celebrating... Junior Negrao

Champions League is finished, a full 11 months after it had started. It was a real slog. Most teams had played one or two group-stage games before the tournament was originally suspended due to coronavirus (though three of the four Chinese sides didn't even manage one) back in March. The restart was pushed back to June and then September and October for the western zone, and November and December for the east.

Qatar hosted all the games after the action resumed and did well. There was a major outbreak among the Al Hilal squad in September but most believe that this had started before the team left Saudi Arabia. In the end, over 30 players and staff tested positive which resulted in the defending champions being forced to withdraw despite already having booked a place in the knockout stage.

Persepolis eventually came through in the west, defeating Al Nassr of Saudi Arabia in a semi-final penalty shoot-out, and had to wait more than two months to find out their final opponent from the eastern half of the draw.

The three Australian teams had not played since August and were almost treating the trip to Qatar as pre-season for the new A-League campaign that was due to kick off on December 27. Perth Glory, Sydney and Melbourne Victory were worried that if they reached the final then they would be quarantined back home for Christmas and the start of the season.

The 2020 AFC Champions League is finished, a full 11 months after it had started. It was a real slog

Chinese teams had been stuck in hotel rooms, except for training and games, since July when the league season finally kicked-off. Shanghai SIPG, Shanghai Shenhua, Guangzhou Evergrande and Beijing Guoan travelled to Qatar in Hazmat suits as soon as they finished the last game of the season. Korean teams finished a week earlier while the Japanese season was still carrying on forcing the three J.League clubs to split their squads.

It went better than expected. Andres Iniesta starred for big-spending Vissel Kobe in their first continental campaign and along with 2019 J.League champions Yokohama F. Marinos, got out of the group stage with little fuss. That was not true of Guangzhou Evergrande. The Chinese team were champions in 2013 and 2015, yet went home early.

Led by Oscar, Shanghai SIPG arrived in Qatar with concerns over team spirit and a falling out between coach Vitor Pereira and Hulk. That relationship didn't improve and Hulk played no part in the last two games after giving his boss a mouthful upon an earlier substitution.

Perth Glory and Sydney continued Australia's struggles in the tournament, though at least Melbourne Victory squeezed past Seoul into the knockout stage before being knocked out by Ulsan. The Korean Tigers then went on to end Chinese representation in the quarter-finals, defeating Beijing Guoan. Beijing had been China's sole hope after Kobe saw off SIPG in the second round. Iniesta picked up a knock and played little part as Kobe then squeezed past Suwon Bluewings of Korea in the quarters before losing to Ulsan in the last four.

It was Ulsan's eighth successive win, a tournament record, and going into the final they were the favourites against a Persepolis team that had not played in December and were missing four key players due to injury and suspension.

It was a good game, with Mehdi Abdi scoring against the run of play after 45 minutes, but there was still time before the break for Junior to equalise, scoring from the rebound after his penalty had been saved. Early in the second half he made no mistake with another spot-kick and Ulsan held on to win a second title for the club and number 12 for the country. As the celebrations started, officials could breathe a sigh of relief that it was all over for a few weeks – at least until qualification for 2021 begins.

MLS Cup play-offs

JAMES NALTON

Columbus Crew crowned champions for second time

Club-record signing Lucas Zelarayan stars in MLS Cup win against Seattle Sounders

As Columbus Crew captain Jonathan Mensah lifted the MLS Cup following his side's 3-0 victory against Seattle Sounders, it signified more than just one of the most convincing MLS Cup final wins.

It represented a victory on and off the pitch for a club whose very existence was threatened as recently as two years ago.

The Crew's home since 1999, where this 2020 final took place in front of 1,500 fans, was Major League Soccer's first "soccer-specific" stadium. It set the standard for clubs all across the league, but the Crew were almost not here to make this final piece of history.

In 2017, the then-owner, Anthony Precourt, announced plans to move the franchise to Austin, Texas. He, rightly, faced stiff opposition to the move from fans who fought to keep one of the original MLS clubs in their city.

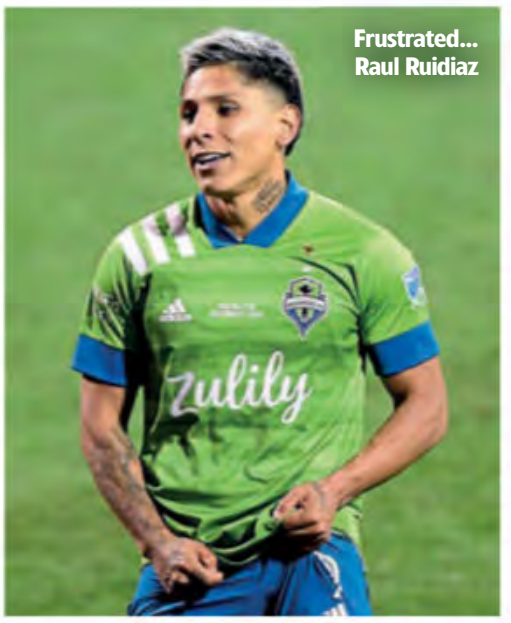
The battle lasted over a year, uniting soccer communities in Columbus, Ohio and beyond, and after much wrangling the Crew were taken over by a new ownership group who made sure the club stayed put.

As part of this next era, the Crew will

Champions...Columbus Crew celebrating their first MLS Cup victory since 2008

Jonathan Mensah... celebrating victory

Impressive... Lucas Zelarayan



Frustrated... Raul Ruidiaz

move to a new downtown facility in 2021. Though some games will be played at the old ground next season, this MLS Cup victory was a fitting bookend to the stories written over the years at what has been an important arena for the sport in the United States.

Caleb Porter's side had only lost once in the MAPFRE Stadium in 2020, but were up against it going into the final. Seattle were favourites and were taking part in their fourth MLS Cup final in five seasons.

Their Uruguayan playmaker, Nicolas Lodeiro, missed out on the 2020 MVP award to Alejandro Pozuelo of Toronto FC but was seen as the star player going into this game, likely to give Seattle the edge.

Columbus finished fourth in the overall regular season table – a position that meant they hosted this final against the sixth-placed Sounders – but were missing key players. Pedro Santos and Darlington Nagbe tested positive for COVID-19 in the week leading up to the game in what was a cruel blow for both players.

Though all eyes were on Lodeiro, admiring pre-match glances were also made towards the Crew's own South American creator-in-chief, Lucas Zelarayan. The 28-year-old Argentine was named MLS Newcomer of the Year for 2020 after joining from Mexican side Tigres.

Zelarayan opened the scoring in the first half of the final with a left-footed volley too hot for Sounders keeper Stefan Frei to handle. Six minutes later he set up Derrick Etienne Jr. who finished coolly for the Crew's second.

Two goals would have been enough but Zelarayan struck again, finding the top corner in the final ten minutes and making him the clear and deserved winner of the MLS Cup MVP award.

This MLS Cup victory was a fitting bookend to the stories written over the years at what has been an important arena for the sport in the United States

Celebrations...Columbus Crew are set to leave the MAPFRE Stadium later this year

Prior to Zelarayan's performance in the final, the standout performer in the play-offs had been another Argentine playmaker, Minnesota United's Emanuel Reynoso.

The 25-year-old came into his own during the post season, registering seven assists and a goal in three games. On this form, the former Boca Juniors man looks set to be one of the league's standout players in 2021.

The early rounds of the play-offs treated fans to some typical MLS unpredictability. Nashville defeated fellow expansion side Inter Miami, and also saw off last season's MLS Cup runners-up, Toronto FC.

Supporters' Shield winners Philadelphia Union were knocked out by New England Revolution, but the biggest story of the early stages emerged during a penalty shoot-out between Orlando City and New York City.

Orlando celebrated a win when Pedro Gallese saved Valentin Castellanos' penalty, but replays revealed that the goalkeeper had stepped off his line.

Gallese was shown a yellow card as a result – the problem being, this was his second booking so yellow turned to red.

Orlando couldn't make a substitution during the shoot-out, so it was left to defender Rodrigo Schlegel to wear the gloves for the remaining spot-kicks.

Of course, this being MLS, Schlegel then saved Gudmundur Thorarinsson's penalty, securing his place in soccer folklore.

Orlando celebrated again, but soon realised they needed to score another themselves in order to win. It was duly dispatched by Benji Michel, making it third-celebration lucky for the home side.

Luckily for the league, plenty of drama was saved for the latter stages. Reynoso's Minnesota narrowly lost out to Seattle in a stirring semi-final, before Columbus lifted their first MLS Cup since 2008 in an historic final.

DECEMBER 3-DECEMBER 31, 2020

Global diary

Stories from the four corners of the football world

Thursday December 3

SWITZERLAND: Albanian capital Tirana is chosen to host the first final of the UEFA Conference League when it launches in the 2021-22 season. The Nations League draw pits Spain against hosts Italy in one semi-final, and France v Belgium in the other.
CANADA: For the second time in three years, Bayern Munich's Alphonso Davies is named the 2020 Canadian Player of the Year.
EUROPE: In the Europa League, Tottenham Hotspur draw 3-3 in a thriller with LASK, Celtic lose 4-2 to Milan, Arsenal thrash Rapid Vienna 4-1 and Rangers edge out Standard Liege 3-2, while Leicester City go down 1-0 to Zorya Luhansk in Ukraine.
NETHERLANDS: Former Everton and Real Madrid winger Royston Drenthe is declared bankrupt.

Friday December 4

FIFA: FIFA agree to delay the new 24-team Club World Cup by a year, meaning that the 2021 tournament will continue to stick to the seven-team format, with Japan set to be the hosts.
ITALY: Napoli's stadium is officially renamed the Diego Armando Maradona Stadium.

Saturday December 5

GERMANY: Bayern Munich draw 3-3 with RB Leipzig in a key clash at the top of the Bundesliga table.
ITALY: Juventus come from behind to beat Torino 2-1 in the Turin derby, thanks to a last-gasp goal by defender Leonardo Bonucci.
SPAIN: Cadiz stun Barcelona with a 2-1 La Liga victory, their first over the Catalan side since 1991, to move up to fifth in the table.
FRANCE: Kylian Mbappe scores his 100th goal for Paris Saint-Germain in a 3-1 victory over European hopefuls Montpellier.
SINGAPORE: Albirex Niigata S win the Singapore Premier League title for the fourth time.
EGYPT: Al Ahly complete a Champions League, Premier League and domestic cup treble for the first time since 2006 after beating Tala'ea El Gaish in the Egypt Cup final on penalties.

Renamed... Napoli's stadium

Sunday December 6

ENGLAND: In the Premier League, Tottenham Hotspur pile the pressure on Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta by winning the North London derby 2-0.
ITALY: A 2-1 win at Sampdoria helps Milan extend their impressive form to eight wins in ten games, their best start since 1954-55.

Walk off...PSG and Istanbul Basaksehir players protest

Monday December 7

COLOMBIA: Former Porto, Atletico Madrid and Colombia striker Jackson Martinez announces his retirement.

Tuesday December 8

FIFA: Qatar will join Europe's qualifying Group A non-competitively, in order to prepare for hosting the 2022 World Cup.
EUROPE: PSG and Istanbul Basaksehir walk off the pitch during their Champions League match in protest after the fourth official is accused of using racist language. Manchester United are eliminated after a 3-2 defeat to RB Leipzig, while Juventus win 3-0 at the Nou Camp thanks to a brace from Cristiano Ronaldo.
LIBYA: Ali Mergini resigns as coach of the Libyan national team.

Wednesday December 9

EUROPE: Monchengladbach reach the Champions League knockout stages in spite of a 2-0 defeat to Real Madrid while PSG win their rearranged clash with Istanbul Basaksehir 5-1.
SOUTH KOREA: K League outfit FC Seoul name former South Korea international Park Jin-sub as their new head coach.
TURKMENISTAN: Altyn Asyr win the Turkmenistan Cup, defeating Kopetdag Ashgabat 3-0 on penalties after a 1-1 draw in the final.

Thursday December 10

BRAZIL: CAS rule Santos will have to pay €2.9m to Barcelona due to a breach of contract over Gabriel Barbosa. The Catalan side had first refusal on the Brazilian as part of the deal that brought Neymar to the Nou Camp, yet they were not informed when Internazionale made an offer for the striker.
EUROPE: The Europa League tie between Villarreal and Qarabag is postponed due to a COVID-19 outbreak in the Azerbaijani team's squad. Meanwhile, the Under-21 European Championship draw takes place, with Netherlands drawn alongside arch-rivals Germany in Group A.
FRANCE: Antoine Griezmann cuts ties with Huawei due to China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims.
ITALY: Brazilian forward Robinho has his nine-year prison sentence confirmed by an Italian court.

Friday December 11

HAITI: FIFA announce that they will send an emergency management team to run football in Haiti, with Yves Jean-Bart believed to still be running the show despite his ban last month.
EUROPE: Ukraine ask UEFA to draw lots to decide the result of their cancelled Nations League clash with Switzerland.

Saturday December 12

ITALY: Paolo Rossi's funeral takes place in Vicenza, but sadly his house is burgled while his wife is in attendance.
BRAZIL: Fluminense legend Escurinho dies aged 90.
SOUTH AFRICA: Motjeka Madisha, defender for Mamelodi Sundowns and South Africa, dies in a car crash – just weeks after Anele Ngcongca.
SPAIN: Real Madrid beat rivals Atletico 2-0 in the Madrid derby, closing the gap between them to just three points.

Sunday December 13

NETHERLANDS: Ajax forward ➤

Northern Mariana

STEVE MENARY

Pacific Ocean pioneers

How a group of parents created an international football team

Northern Mariana... the team line up for a pre-match photo

Fifteen years after forming, the Northern Mariana Islands have finally been accepted as a full Asian Football Confederation member, but face a wait before playing their first senior game as an AFC member.

The NMIFA was formed by a group of US soccer parents, who came to Saipan, the largest of the 14 islands that make up the Northern Mariana archipelago, and found that organised football had died out.

"There was football but it was all in the Korean community," says Wes Bogdan, a superior court judge and one of those early pioneers, who helped set up a new league. "When they saw we had lines and nets, they joined us."

The league took off and, in 2008, Northern Mariana were accepted as full members of the East Asian Football Federation. Under president Jerry Tan, the islands began to play internationals against other EAFF members but finding eligible players was complicated.

Bogdan explains: "When we first set up a national team, we sent out all of these invites but a lot of the great players on Saipan couldn't play because they didn't have a US visa. Even though I was old, I was an able body so I played and got a cap."

> "[As] full members we will be blessed with many opportunities for our programme and our players"
>
> Northern Mariana Islands forward Sunjoon Tenorio

The problem is the complicated ethnic and political make-up of the islands. The game is most popular amongst the immigrant community, particularly Koreans and Chinese, but the islands have been under US control since World War Two and players need a US passport to play for the national team.

Thriving...the domestic league is also going strong

Saipan has a population of around 50,000, where there is a flourishing league of 12 clubs in two leagues with veterans Bogdan and Tan still playing in the second tier for Shirley's FC. Another 10,000 people live mainly on Rotan and Tinian, where NMIFA has set up a youth section.

At youth level, the game is flourishing but many players choose to head to the United States to attend college at 18, which prompted the NMIFA to hold training camps in San Diego and Dallas in the past to get the national team together.

Despite all of these challenges a team has been fielded in qualifying for the EAFF Cup and, in June 2014, a first victory was recorded with a 2-1 win over Macau. That success has not been emulated, but the gap is narrowing according to forward Sunjoon Tenorio, who attends Warner Pacific University in Oregon.

He explains: "I think there was a gap between us and Mongolia, but I do feel the gap has been decreasing over the years. With Guam and Macau I feel like we competed and it wasn't as one-sided as it has been in the past.

"Now that we are full members we will be blessed with many opportunities for our programme and our players as well. We still have a long way to go to be amongst the top teams, but I do feel like with the new opportunities we will get we will only improve and work our way towards competing and maybe winning against some of the bigger Asian countries."

With the local league suspended due to coronavirus and no senior national games scheduled, Northern Mariana's players must wait before taking their next step up the international ladder.

South America

TIM VICKERY

Fighting back... the pandemic has put a great strain on South American football

2020 league round-ups

South American leagues find a way to crown their champions

When coronavirus struck last March, Europe had to decide how to finish championships that were already in the closing straight. South America's task was more complicated.

Argentina aside, everyone now organises their season by the calendar year. The 2020 campaign had barely started when the action was interrupted. Administrators on the continent were faced with the challenge of improvising entire league championships. They came up with different solutions, which was hardly a surprise, for two reasons. First, a variety of formats are used across the continent – there is nothing like the European consensus in favour of the league system. And also, they had different timescales to work within, either because COVID-19 hit some countries harder than others, or because governments and health authorities took a different view on when it was possible to return.

With the international competitions, the Copas Libertadores and Sudamericana, a decision was made to retain the existing structure of the tournaments, despite the six-month break between mid-March and September 15. The solution was to push back the finish date from late November to the end of January – a cramming of fixtures which, as we will see, has had an effect on events in some of the league campaigns.

Brazil, Chile and Uruguay followed suit, extending their leagues until the end of February. Elsewhere, in order to wrap up 2020 before the start of 2021, some creative thinking was called for. Despite all the differences, one thing held true across the continent; matches were played behind closed doors.

The first national league back in action was Paraguay, which restarted on July 21. The country

Champions...Olimpia lift the Clausura in Paraguay, the first South American nation to return to action

Peruvian champions... Sporting Cristal

divides its season into two separate championships, the Apertura and Clausura, with the 12 teams playing each other home and away in both. The Apertura was completed as scheduled, with Cerro Porteno in top form at the restart, powering to a 33rd league title with a comfortable five-point margin. It ended a run of four consecutive titles for Olimpia, and with a disappointing exit in the group phase of the Libertadores, this brought an end to the reign of Argentine coach Daniel Garnero. But they would be back, under Nestor Gorosito, another Argentine.

For the Clausura, the teams played each other just once, with the top eight qualifying for a knockout competition. Olimpia beat Cerro Porteno on penalties in the quarter-final, but in the final found themselves two goals down to Guarani – who had reached the second round of the Libertadores and may have been jaded as a result. Olimpia, for whom Roque Santa Cruz was once again in fine form, hit back to equalise, and in spite of playing the last 20 minutes with ten men, held out to force a penalty shoot-out. The vital kick was missed by Raul Bobadilla, the Guarani striker who stripped himself near naked when celebrating a goal in the semi-final. This time, though, Olimpia could celebrate their 45th title.

While Paraguay were first back, Bolivia (November 27) and Venezuela (October 14) were last to restart – which may have something to do with the fact that both lost their FA presidents to COVID-19.

In both cases a much-shortened campaign ended with an unusual winner. Bolivia scrapped the Clausura, made the Apertura the sole championship and had to cram in fixtures to play all 26 rounds by New Year's Eve. It turned into a La Paz duel, with the big two Bolivar and The Strongest beaten to the title by Always Ready, a team whose last win had been in 1957. Promoted in 2019, Always Ready spent almost all of the last three decades out of the first division, but now have enough money behind them to

In order to wrap up 2020 before the start of 2021, some creative thinking was called for

assemble a squad of veterans, guided over the line by Omar Asad, another Argentine coach.

In Venezuela the administrators played a game of damage limitation. The 17 teams (Zulia and LALA pulled out) were divided into two groups, each of which played in a single city, Valencia or Barinas. The group winners met in a final, where the traditional Deportivo Tachira were beaten 2-0 by Deportivo La Guaira, a team from Caracas who were founded in 2008 as Real Esspor and now have their first title.

The South American country with most coronavirus deaths per capita is Peru, where the authorities responded by moving the entire championship to the capital city of Lima in a bid to limit the spread of the disease. The eventual restart date was August 18. For the first time the top flight was made up of 20 teams. In the Apertura they met each other home and away. To shorten things they were divided into two groups for the Clausura, with the group leaders playing off for the right to meet the Apertura winners in the two-legged grand final – which was a contest between two of Lima's traditional big three. In another triumph for Roberto Mosquera, a coach with an impressive body of work, Sporting Cristal beat Universitario 3-2 on aggregate to land their 20th title – and finish the decade with a record of coming out on top in every even year. Amazingly, the other local giant, Alianza Lima, were relegated – despite never having to leave their home city. They threw money at the problem, appointing a sequence of big-name coaches, but perhaps suffered from the Copa Libertadores fixture pile up, found themselves sinking in quicksand and could not dig themselves out.

There was a big-name relegation in Ecuador too (restart date August 14), where El Nacional of Quito went down, while two other giants disputed the title. Two phases were played, the 16 teams meeting each once per phase, with the winners meeting in the final. Liga of Quito (LDU) drew 1-1 on aggregate with Barcelona of Guayaquil, and for the second consecutive year endured a nightmare penalty shoot-out, leaving Barcelona to celebrate a 16th title.

And there was a 15th league title in Colombia for America de Cali – proof for relegated sides that there is life after the second division. A traditional giant, especially in the '80s, they went down in 2011 and spent half the decade in the second division. Their league win at the end of 2019 was their first in over a decade, and now they successfully defended their title. After a September 12 restart, the 20 teams played each other once, with the top eight qualifying for the knockout phase. America overcame Junior of Barranquilla, the most successful side of recent times, in the semis before holding off a reaction from Santa Fe of Bogota to win the title 3-2 on aggregate.

Ecuadorian champions... Barcelona

➤ Quincy Promes is arrested on suspicion of being involved in an alleged stabbing, a charge that he denies.

ITALY: Cristiano Ronaldo marks his 100th game for Juventus with a double against Genoa, taking his goal tally for the Italians to 79.

CROATIA: Former Austria, Croatia, Albania, Stuttgart and Fenerbahce coach Otto Baric dies aged 87.

Monday December 14

UEFA: The draws for the Champions League and Europa League knockout round is made with PSG v Barcelona, Atletico Madrid v Chelsea, Real Sociedad v Manchester United and Benfica v Arsenal the most eye-catching ties.

MEXICO: Leon beat Pumas UNAM 2-0 (3-1 on aggregate) in the Guardianes 2020 LigaMX final.

UAE: Dutchman Bert van Marwijk is reappointed as head coach of the United Arab Emirates' national team – a year after he was sacked.

COLOMBIA: Santa Fe are crowned champions of the Liga Femenina for the second time after beating America de Cali 4-1 on aggregate.

Tuesday December 15

ENGLAND: Manchester City are held to a draw by West Bromwich Albion in Slaven Bilic's final game in charge. Elsewhere, Chelsea lose 2-1 to Wolverhampton Wanderers, while midfielder Danny Drinkwater is sent off for violent conduct in an Under-23s game.

Wednesday December 16

IFAB: It is announced that concussion substitutes will be trialled in 2020.

JAPAN: Vissel Kobe midfielder Andres Iniesta is ruled out of action for four months following a muscle tear, putting his long-term future in doubt.

KUWAIT: Kuwait SC add more silverware to their trophy cabinet after beating Al Arabi 1-0 in the Kuwait Super Cup at the Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium.

UAE: Seven-time United Arab Emirates Pro League champions Shabab Al Ahli Dubai announce the return of former coach Mahdi Ali to replace departing boss Gerard Zaragoza.

ENGLAND: Liverpool beat Tottenham in a top-of-the-table Premier League clash thanks to a stoppage-time header from Brazil striker Roberto Firmino. ➤

➤ **GERMANY:** Bayern Munich striker Robert Lewandowski scores the 250th goal of his Bundesliga career with a brace in a 2-1 victory over Wolfsburg.

Thursday December 17

RUSSIA: The nation's ban from all major sporting events after a doping scandal is reduced from four years to two by CAS.

Friday December 18

USA: Weston McKennie is named US Soccer Male Player of the Year ahead of Christian Pulisic and Sergino Dest. Samantha Mewis is named the Female Player of the Year, while Gio Reyna wins Young Player of the Year.
GERMANY: Youssoufa Moukoko becomes the Bundesliga's youngest-ever goalscorer by scoring in Borussia Dortmund's 2-1 defeat to Union Berlin.
AUSTRALIA: A-League side Melbourne Victory announce the signing of former Premier League defender Ryan Shotton.

Saturday December 19

ENGLAND: Liverpool thrash Crystal Palace 7-0 at Selhurst Park. Their nearest rivals Everton also win, beating Arsenal 2-1 at Goodison Park, while Manchester City win 1-0 at Southampton.
GERMANY: Bayern Munich come from behind to beat rivals Bayer Leverkusen 2-1. Robert Lewandowski's brace ensured he ended 2020 with 47 goals in just 44 games and helped Bayern usurp Leverkusen in top spot.
CHINA: Shandong Luneng beat Chinese Super League champions Jiangsu Suning 2-0 in the final of the Chinese FA Cup, denying Cosmin Olaroiu's team a league and cup double.

Sunday December 20

SCOTLAND: Celtic win the postponed 2020 Scottish FA Cup final against Hearts on penalties, sealing an unprecedented fourth domestic treble in a row.
ITALY: Milan's Rafael Leao scores the fastest goal in Serie A history after just six seconds in a 2-1 win over top-four rivals Sassuolo.

Monday December 21

ENGLAND: Fabio Silva becomes Wolves' youngest goalscorer, and replaces Cristiano Ronaldo as the youngest Portuguese player to score in the Premier League. ➤

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

Kawasaki lead from the front

Kawasaki Frontale seal third J.League title in style

2020 was the year of Kawasaki Frontale in the J.League. Frontale clinched their third title in four years in record-breaking fashion with four matches left to play and in the best possible way, 5-0 at home to the only team still mathematically able to catch them, second-placed Gamba Osaka. They repeated the act in more modest fashion on New Year's Day by defeating Gamba 1-0 in the Emperor's Cup final to seal a memorable league and cup double.

Frontale coach Toru Oniki, now 46 and in his fourth year at the helm, said he had told his players to aim for the title from day one; that now more than ever, in the COVID-19 crisis, Frontale had to lead the way for Japanese football. Oniki applauded their "tremendous rivalry on the training ground, and team spirit on the pitch."

Akihiro Ienaga, the J.League's Player of the Year last time Frontale won the title in 2018, was the hero on the day against Gamba with a memorable hat-trick. Former Brazil striker Leandro Damiao opened the scoring and Manabu Saito added the fifth in the last minute of normal time with his first goal of the season.

In almost every way, it was a record-breaking season in Japan played, of course, in remarkable circumstances against the background of the coronavirus. Except for the opening weekend in February, the entire 34-game first division season, normally played across nine and a half months, had to be completed in five and a half.

The intensity was always going to benefit the team with the best squad and Frontale proved from the first that theirs was the squad to beat. Oniki used his full complement of substitutes in almost every match and it hardly mattered who appeared where in the rotation. When Frontale struggled to make headway in the first half, the fresh substitutes scored more often than not against their tiring opponents in the second.

Their football was more compact this year. The forwards defended better. The short passes connected brightly, especially in the box. The changes of tempo and penetrating long balls frequently caught their opponents off-guard and the finishing was pinpoint with any number of players able to score.

The statistics tell the story. At the moment when Frontale clinched the title, their points total was already 75, the highest since the first division switched to its present 18-team format in 2005. In the same period, their 24 wins were already the most. Their title, secured with four games left to play, was the fastest. Their goal tally, 79, was still five shy of the record, but they still had time to set a new record, which they duly did, ending with 88 in total.

Strikeforce...Kawasaki's Kaoru Mitoma (L) and Leandro Damiao (R)

Frontale also set and then beat their own club record for consecutive wins with runs of ten and then 12 straight league victories. Kashima Antlers still hold the league's all-time record for that with 16 straight wins in 1998-99.

In their final game, Frontale recovered from a two-goal deficit to beat Kashiwa Reysol 3-2, ending the campaign 18 points clear of their nearest challengers.

Oniki started the season with a new 4-3-3 formation that added extra punch to the attack after last year's slip in penetration. The rest was partly down to the coach and players having been together for so long, but Oniki's cause was helped, too, by the continuing emergence of young players such as Ao Tanaka in rear midfield, speedy Reo Hatate on the right wing and, most prominently of all, homegrown Kaoru Mitoma, who scored 13 goals from wide on the left in his first season as a professional after graduating from Tsukuba University.

The veterans produced as well. Yu Kobayashi, the league's top scorer in 2017, netted 14. Leandro Damiao remained the perfect target man, scoring 13, and Ienaga was composure personified with his holding-up skills, deft, one-touch play and 11 goals. Frontale had three of the J. League's top eight top scorers. In all, nine Frontale players were named in

Frontale also set and then beat their own club record for consecutive wins with runs of ten and then 12 straight league victories

the J.League's Best XI – Jung Sung-ryong, Miki Yamane, Shogo Taniguchi, Jesiel, Kyohei Noborizato, Ienaga, Tanaka, Hidemasa Morita and Mitoma – where they were joined by the league's top scorer, Michael Olunga (Kashiwa Reysol), and runner up, Everaldo (Kashima Antlers).

Special mention must be made of Kengo Nakamura, capped 68 times for Japan, who cemented his legend status at the club he had been with since 2003, when Frontale were still in the second division, with a goal on his 40th birthday on October 31. He announced his retirement at the end of the season the following day.

Nakamura's presence, always huge, only grew with time and these three titles in four years, after his personal triumph of being named 2016 J.League Player of the Year, will also be remembered as his own crowning achievement. There is even a strong case for ascribing last year's dip in form to the search for the post-Nakamura team, which Oniki appears to have forged this season.

The home crowd enjoyed seeing Frontale clinch the title – something they were denied in 2017 and 2018 – and the atmosphere, with drums and clapping but no cheering, was not at all bad with 12,000 fans allowed into the stadium.

Last year's champions, Yokohama F. Marinos, never really challenged, and big-spending Vissel Kobe also made no impression in the J.League, instead saving their best for last in the Asian Champions League. The main but very distant challengers were Nagoya Grampus, Kashima Antlers and the two Osaka teams, Gamba and Cerezo. Gamba Osaka and Nagoya Grampus will join Frontale in the 2021 ACL, while Cerezo advance to the qualifying play-off round.

The season closed with two cup finals rather than the usual one. Mitoma scored Frontale's winner against Gamba in the Emperor's Cup on New Year's Day, and FC Tokyo won the League Cup final, postponed from November due to a COVID-19 cluster infection at Kashiwa Reysol, 2-1 against Reysol on January 4. There was no relegation this season due to the special measures but Tokushima Vortis and Avispa Fukuoka were promoted from Division Two, meaning the first division will be played with 20 teams in 2021 and four clubs will be relegated next season.

Top goalscorer... Kashiwa Reysol's Michael Olunga

AWARDS

Player of the Year/Top Scorer

MICHAEL OLUNGA *(Kashiwa)*
The Kenyan striker was runaway top scorer with 28 goals. Tall, quick and deft on the ground, his impact was strongly reminiscent of Patrick Mboma's for Gamba Osaka in 1997.

Champion Manager

TORU ONIKI *(Kawasaki Frontale)*
In only his fourth season as a manager, Oniki became the third man to win three J.League titles as coach following Oswaldo Oliveira (Kashima Antlers) and Hajime Moriyasu (Sanfrecce Hiroshima).

Manager of the Year

TSUNEYASU MIYAMOTO *(Gamba Osaka)*
The former Gamba and Japan defender lifted Gamba to second in the table in his third year in charge.

Best Young Player

AYUMU SEKO *(Cerezo Osaka)*
After three seasons playing for Cerezo's Under-23 team in the J.League Third Division, the tall, 20-year-old centre-back emerged as a key figure for Cerezo's top team this year.

South Africa

MARK GLEESON

Changing of the guard

Traditional giants of South Africa, Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates, are in real danger of being left behind by Mamelodi Sundowns

Champions... Mamelodi Sundowns have now won three consecutive South African league titles on two occasions

As professional football in South Africa marks a 50th anniversary, 21 of the 49 previous league championships have been won by the Soweto giants Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates.

They dominated the early days, collecting trophies and building up a legion of supporters that easily spills over from their base in the giant township in the outskirts of Johannesburg, through the rest of the country and across the borders.

The derby between the two clubs is often cited among the biggest in world football, filling up the cavernous 90,000-seater Soccer City. It has a violent history but over the last decades has become as much of a must-be-seen-at social gathering, like a glamourous day out at the races, as it is a derby between old foes.

Sponsors still flock to the teams, television viewing numbers for their matches are high but, on the field, the two clubs have long since been usurped by a new pretender – Mamelodi Sundowns – and left far behind in not only the tussle for trophies, but in the market for players too.

It used to be the dream for most South African kids to join the Chiefs or Pirates. The rest were but also-rans. But the money of mining magnate Patrice Motsepe, who owns Sundowns, has changed the marketplace over the last decade and now the lure of top salaries proves a lot stronger than childhood

Investing... Sundowns owner Patrice Motsepe

loyalty. Chiefs and Pirates can no longer afford the best and while their brands remain highly visible, the omnipotent aura is fast slipping as they repeatedly fail in their bid to get back onto the winners' podium.

It has been nine years since Pirates last won the league title and six for Chiefs, who have had a series of calamitous setbacks.

They reached the FA Cup final in 2019, pitted against second-tier opposition in what looked a routine assignment, only to lose to unheralded TS Galaxy as they gave away a penalty in stoppage time at the end of the match.

Last season, with the former Bundesliga coach Ernst Middendorp in charge, Chiefs had as much as a 13-point lead at one stage and when the league was suspended in March as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, they still had a comfortable four-point advantage with eight matches left.

The season resumed in a bio-secure bubble in Johannesburg in August and although Chiefs won only two out of seven they were still expected to beat relegation-threatened Baroka FC in their final game and pip Sundowns to the title. Instead, they drew, producing a dreadful, nerve-ridden performance as they let the championship slip out of their grasp.

Middendorp was promptly fired and the club turned to Gavin Hunt, one of the most successful coaches in the country, for the new season that kicked off in October. But his efforts at attempting a turnaround have been stymied by a one-year transfer ban on the club, since confirmed by CAS, for signing Madagascar international Andriamirado "Dax" Andrianarimanana. Chiefs claimed he was contract free and did not pay a transfer fee but Fosa Juniors took the case to Zurich and FIFA found otherwise.

The mistake is reflective of a general malaise at a family-run club where accountability is low and leaves Chiefs now with a squad with too many youngsters and too many key players past their sell-by date. Predictably they have struggled and sit in the bottom half of the South African Premier League standings and, although relegation is unlikely to be a threat, they do not look like breaking their duck any time soon.

The money of mining magnate Patrice Motsepe, who owns Sundowns, has changed the marketplace over the last decade

They are fortunate that South African league matches remain behind closed doors so the pressure from success-hungry fans is at least kept at bay – for the moment.

Pirates, however, have some light at the end of their tunnel. They won the Top Eight Cup final against Bloemfontein Celtic 2-1 in December, halting a run of four successive cup final defeats and brought their six-year trophyless run to an end. South Africa has three annual knockout trophies - the FA Cup and League Cup (this season cancelled because of a lack of available dates) plus a competition for the clubs that finished in the top eight in the league the previous season.

It has taken a year, with the COVID crackdown in between, for another German coach Joe Zinnbauer to make his mark and get Pirates looking formidable again. Pirates will certainly be title challengers in this new campaign and after some clever pre-season purchases could go all the way.

The two Soweto giants remain a major talking point but no longer command near exclusive focus. It is now a much more democratic landscape in South Africa.

➤ **WSL:** Japan captain Mana Iwabuchi joins Women's Super League side Aston Villa, while US World Cup winner Alex Morgan confirms that she will leave Tottenham and return home.
USA: Former USA midfielder Kyle Beckerman announces his retirement after 21 MLS seasons and a record 498 matches.

Tuesday December 22

SWITZERLAND: FIFA files a criminal complaint against former president Sepp Blatter over the finances of its loss-making soccer museum in Zurich.
SPAIN: Atletico Madrid secure an important victory at third-placed Real Sociedad, winning 2-0 in San Sebastian. Lionel Messi breaks Pele's record of goals for a single club, moving onto 644, while Real Madrid announce the return of Iker Casillas to the Bernabeu as the club's Foundation deputy CEO.
ENGLAND: Championship side Brentford knock Newcastle United out of the Carabao Cup quarter-finals with a 1-0 victory, while Arsenal are thumped 4-1 at home by Manchester City.
FRANCE: Lille owner Gerard Lopez confirms that the Ligue 1 club is for sale.
ITALY: Juventus suffer their first defeat of the season, with Juan Cuadrado sent off in a 3-0 loss at home to Fiorentina.
CONCACAF: Confederation president Victor Montagliani announces the CONCACAF Champions League will expand in 2023.
JAPAN: Urawa Red Diamonds announce that head coach Tsuyoshi Otsuki will leave the club to be replaced by Spaniard Ricardo Rodriquez.
SOUTH KOREA: Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors announce Kim Sang-sik will replace Jose Morais as head coach of the K League champions.
UZBEKISTAN: Pakhtakor head coach Shota Arveladze announces his resignation from the Uzbekistan Super League champions.
TURKEY: Ozkan Sumer, former player, coach and president of Trabzonspor passes away.

Wednesday December 23

ENGLAND: Tottenham and Manchester United join Manchester City and Brentford in the Carabao Cup semi-finals ➤

Philippines

JOHN DUERDEN

Looking to bounce back stronger

United City are crowned champions of the 2020 Philippines Football League as the sport continues to battle for relevance

Winners...United City celebrate

The 2020 Philippines Football League (PFL) was a sprint not a marathon with the season starting on October 28 and ending on November 9. Each of the six teams played each other once to give a total of five games, far fewer than the 24 that took place in 2019. In the end United City ended up as champions, collecting 12 points to finish above Kaya-Iloilo and book a place in the play-offs for the 2021 AFC Champions League.

Fans should be happy a league took place at all. The Philippines is the only country in Southeast Asia where football is not the number one sport. This presents long-term challenges in growing the game in this former American colony which has long preferred "The Three Bs" - basketball, billiards and boxing. It also made the global pandemic especially dangerous for the Philippines which does not yet have the deep football foundations of neighbours such as Thailand, Malaysia and others.

What is of immediate concern looking ahead to 2021 is the number of teams in the league that has fallen from eight when the league started in 2017 to six in 2020 with founder members such as Davao Aguilas, Ilocos United and Meralco Manila falling by the wayside.

They had been there at the start when the PFL replaced the United Football League. The old competition was concentrated mainly around Manila, but the capital is not a hotbed of the game in the country, and it was hoped that taking the game to more football-friendly provinces in this sprawling archipelago would give it a boost.

There have been encouraging signs. The national team, once the whipping boys of Southeast Asia, have made great strides over the past decade and

➤ by beating Stoke City and Everton respectively.

TURKEY: Despite taking the lead, champions Istanbul Basaksehir sink further towards the bottom of the table after losing 4-1 at Fenerbahce, with two of their players also sent off.

SPAIN: Real Madrid re-join Atletico Madrid at the top of La Liga on 32 points – albeit having played two more games – by beating Granada 2-0 at home.

ITALY: Milan's unbeaten start to the season continues with a thrilling 3-2 victory at home to Lazio, with Theo Hernandez netting a stoppage-time winner. City rivals Inter keep the pressure up by beating Verona 2-1.

FRANCE: The Ligue 1 title race intensifies with each of the top three winning. Lille beat Montpellier 3-2, yet surrender top spot to Lyon on goal difference after their 3-0 win over Nantes. One point behind, PSG maintain the pressure with a 4-0 thrashing of Strasbourg, which proves to be Thomas Tuchel's last game in charge of the capital club.

USA: MLS Cup winners Columbus Crew sign two-time MLS Golden Boot winner Bradley Wright-Phillips on a free transfer.

Thursday December 24

ARGENTINA: Boca Juniors beat Racing Club 2-1 on aggregate in the final quarter-final of the Copa Libertadores, joining River Plate, Palmeiras and Santos in the semi-finals of the competition.

SCOTLAND: Kilmarnock legend David Sneddon passes away.

Friday December 25

SPAIN: Antonio Gento, former Real Madrid player and brother to club legend Paco, passes away.

Saturday December 26

URUGUAY: Central Espanol midfielder Maximiliano Pereira tragically dies while swimming by a waterfall in his home country.

ENGLAND: In the Premier League Boxing Day clashes, Arsenal end their seven-game winless run by beating Chelsea 3-1, Everton move up to second with a 1-0 victory at Sheffield United and Leicester score a late equaliser at home to top-four rivals Manchester United.

qualified for the 2019 Asian Cup for the first time. The country's clubs have also done well at the AFC Cup, the continent's version of the Europa League that is reserved for "developing nations" but the league still struggled to make headlines at home.

In March, Green Archers United decided to withdraw after just one season, saying they had not received the publicity they would have liked. "We were hopeful that the media coverage promised in the 2019 Philippines Premier League PPL/PFL season would materialize," the club said. "Unfortunately, this did not happen and has put in question the viability and sustainability of fielding a team and participating this year." The Archers will still be involved in football and youth development but were stepping back from the frontline.

Another blow came ahead of the season. Global Cebu, with four titles from 2010 to 2016, finished bottom in 2019 and had their licence revoked from the country's Games and Amusements Board after failing to pay players and staff.

Had the Azkals Development Team not been added for 2020 then there would have been just five teams and probably no season at all meaning that the youngsters were more than welcome. This catchily-titled club ("Azkals" is a term meaning "streetdog" and is a widely-used nickname for the national team) was led by Sheffield-born Scott Cooper, who worked at Chester City and Leicester City before making a name for himself in Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. The kids did alright, collecting nine points from their five games, conceding just two and finishing in third place.

The football on the pitch has been encouraging but other issues always loom. If making waves in the media is tough, then so is attracting corporate support

The football on the pitch has been encouraging but other issues always loom. If making waves in the media is tough, then so is attracting corporate support. It means that the league was fortunate to tie up a three-year deal with Qatar Airways at the end of 2019 just before the onset of coronavirus. Financial details were not released but the company has still been paying out despite the lack of games. The investment has been crucial.

More is needed as the league's commissioner Coco Torre knows. "The dynamics have always been shifting, and we are putting together the best long-term strategic plan for us to move forward," Torre said. "If we want a more competitive and exciting league, we need more clubs as it would also mean league stability. Football in the country is still developing, that's why we need to raise awareness, build brand equity through a good product, and entice more sponsors to the sport."

That is the ideal solution. The Philippines football scene is one of the friendliest in Asia and deserves a wider audience. That remains to be seen but at least there should be more games in 2021.

Mike Ott...the midfielder was the league's top-scoring Philippine

Sunday December 27

ENGLAND: Sam Allardyce collects his first point as West Brom manager, pulling off a shock 1-1 draw at Anfield, in spite of Liverpool boasting almost 90% possession in the first half.

Monday December 28

ENGLAND: Everton v Manchester City is called off due to COVID-19, with Everton seeking clarification for the postponement from The FA. Elsewhere, Crystal Palace v Leicester and Chelsea v Aston Villa both end in 1-1 draws.

SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi Pro League outfit Al Nassr announce the departure of head coach Rui Vitoria by mutual consent following a string of poor results.

Tuesday December 29

SPAIN: A Messi-less Barcelona drop more points at home, this time after a 1-1 draw with strugglers Eibar, to fall behind Sevilla who move into the top four by beating Villarreal 2-0.

ENGLAND: West Bromwich Albion are thrashed 5-0 at home by Leeds United. Elsewhere, Arsenal seal back-to-wins by beating Brighton away, and Sheffield United's winless run continues with a 1-0 defeat at Burnley.

Wednesday December 30

SPAIN: Atletico Madrid keep their 18th clean sheet in a row against Getafe, winning 1-0 to extend their advantage over Real Madrid, who draw 1-1 at Elche.

ENGLAND: Liverpool are held to a second draw in a row, this time at Newcastle United, while Fulham's trip to Tottenham is postponed due to a number of coronavirus cases at the West London club.

ITALY: Mario Balotelli scores within five minutes on his debut for new club Monza.

Thursday December 31

ENGLAND: ALK Capital complete their takeover of Premier League club Burnley.

SPAIN: Real Sociedad win the Basque derby 1-0 thanks to a goal by winger Cristian Portu.

SCOTLAND: Motherwell manager Stephen Robinson resigns after three years in charge at Fir Park.

AUSTRALIA: A-LEAGUE 2020-21

*Denotes that the player was announced on a scholarship deal

ADELAIDE UNITED

GOALKEEPERS

1 James **DELIANOV**	(21) 20.10.99
33 Dakota **OCHSENHAM**	(21) 28.09.99
*46 Joe **GAUCI**	(20) 04.07.00

DEFENDERS

2 Michael **MARRONE**	(33) 27.01.87
3 George **TIMOTHEOU**	(23) 29.07.97
*15 Noah **SMITH**	(20) 15.12.00
21 Javi **LOPEZ** (Esp)	(35) 21.01.86
22 Michael **JAKOBSEN** (Den)	(35) 02.01.86
23 Jordan **ELSEY**	(26) 02.03.94
34 Yared **ABETEW**	(21) 15.06.99

MIDFIELDERS

4 Ryan **STRAIN**	(23) 02.04.97
6 Louis **D'ARRIGO**	(19) 23.09.01
7 Ryan **KITTO**	(26) 09.08.94
8 Stefan **MAUK**	(25) 12.10.95
16 Nathan **KONSTANDOPOULOS**	(24) 26.06.96
18 Joe **CALETTI**	(22) 14.09.98
26 Ben **HALLORAN**	(28) 14.06.92

FORWARDS

9 Tomi **JURIC**	(29) 22.07.91
*14 Domenic **COSTANZO**	(19) 08.10.01
*17 Mohamed **TOURE**	(16) 26.03.04
*19 Yaya **DUKULY**	(18) 17.01.03
24 Pacifique **NIYONGABIRE**	(20) 15.03.00
29 Kusini **YENGI**	(22) 15.01.99
35 Al Hassan **TOURE**	(20) 30.05.00

COACH

Carl **VEART**	(50) 21.05.70

Experienced...Adelaide United's new signing Tomi Juric has made 41 appearances for Australia, scoring eight goals in the process

BRISBANE ROAR

GOALKEEPERS

1 Macklin **FREKE**	(22) 06.01.99
21 Jamie **YOUNG** (Eng)	(35) 25.08.85

DEFENDERS

3 Corey **BROWN**	(27) 07.01.94
5 Tom **ALDRED** (Sco)	(30) 11.09.90
6 Macaulay **GILLESPHEY** (Eng)	(25) 24.11.95
16 Josh **BRINDELL-SOUTH**	(28) 28.10.92
19 Jack **HINGERT**	(30) 26.09.90
*27 Kai **TREWIN**	(19) 18.05.01
*28 Izaack **POWELL**	(18) 12.02.02
29 Jordan **COURTNEY-PERKINS**	(18) 06.11.02

MIDFIELDERS

8 Danny **KIM**	(22) 28.05.98
10 Riku **DANZAKI** (Jpn)	(20) 31.05.00
14 George **MELLS**	(23) 23.05.97
15 Jesse **DALEY**	(23) 16.10.97
25 Rahmat **AKBARI**	(20) 20.06.00
26 Jay **O'SHEA** (Irl)	(32) 10.08.88
33 Keegan **JELACIC** (Nzl)	(18) 31.07.02
34 Alex **PARSONS**	(21) 06.01.00

FORWARDS

7 Jai **INGHAM** (Nzl)	(27) 14.08.93
9 Masato **KUDO** (Jpn)	(30) 06.05.90
11 Joey **CHAMPNESS**	(23) 27.04.97
23 Dylan **WENZEL-HALLS**	(23) 15.12.97
77 Scott **MCDONALD**	(37) 21.08.83

COACH

Warren **MOON**	(38) 27.05.82

CENTRAL COAST MARINERS

GOALKEEPERS

1 Mark **BIRIGHITTI**	(29) 17.04.91
20 Adam **PEARCE**	(24) 08.01.97

DEFENDERS

3 Lewis **MILLER**	(20) 24.08.00
5 Stefan **NIGRO**	(24) 10.08.96
11 Jack **CLISBY**	(28) 16.02.92
15 Kye **ROWLES**	(22) 24.06.98
21 Ruon **TONGYIK**	(24) 28.12.96
32 Max **BALARD**	(20) 20.11.00

MIDFIELDERS

4 Joshua **NISBET**	(21) 15.06.99
6 Gianni **STENSNESS** (Nzl)	(21) 07.02.99
7 Stefan **JANKOVIC** (Srb)	(23) 11.11.97
8 Oliver **BOZANIC**	(32) 08.01.89
10 Daniel **DE SILVA**	(23) 06.03.97
14 Daniel **BOUMAN**	(22) 07.02.98
22 Michal **JANOTA** (Pol)	(30) 29.07.90
23 Dan **HALL**	(21) 14.06.99
*25 Matthew **HATCH**	(20) 24.09.00
*26 Jaden **CASELLA**	(20) 10.03.00

FORWARDS

12 Marco **URENA** (Crc)	(30) 05.03.90
19 Matt **SIMON**	(35) 22.01.86
*29 Alou **KUOL**	(19) 05.07.01
30 Jordan **SMYLIE**	(20) 28.02.00
31 Damian **TSEKENIS**	(19) 16.04.01

COACH

Alen **STAJCIC**	(47) 02.11.73

MACARTHUR FC

GOALKEEPERS

1 Adam **FEDERICI**	(35) 31.01.85
16 Nick **SUMAN**	(20) 28.02.00

DEFENDERS

2 Jake **MCGING**	(26) 22.05.94
3 Antony **GOLEC**	(30) 29.05.90
6 Aleksandar **JOVANOVIC**	(31) 04.08.89
7 Ivan **FRANJIC**	(33) 10.09.87
12 James **MEREDITH**	(32) 05.04.88
13 Yianni **NICOLAOU**	(21) 05.01.00
15 Aleksandar **SUSNJAR**	(25) 19.08.95
23 Walter **SCOTT**	(21) 02.10.99

MIDFIELDERS

4 **BENAT** (Esp)	(33) 19.02.87
5 Mark **MILLIGAN**	(35) 04.08.85
8 Denis **GENREAU**	(21) 21.05.99
10 Loic **PUYO** (Fra)	(32) 19.12.88
11 Tommy **OAR**	(31) 11.12.89
19 Michael **RUHS**	(18) 27.08.02
21 Jake **HOLLMAN**	(19) 26.08.01
22 Liam **ROSE**	(23) 07.04.97
24 Charles **M'MOMBWA**	(22) 14.03.98
29 Antonis **MARTIS** (Cyp)	(20) 08.09.00
31 Lachlan **ROSE**	(21) 10.05.99

FORWARDS

9 Milislav **POPOVIC**	(23) 06.03.97
14 Moudi **NAJJAR**	(20) 26.06.00
27 Matt **DERBYSHIRE** (Eng)	(34) 14.04.86
33 Markel **SUSAETA** (Esp)	(33) 14.12.97

COACH

Ante **MILICIC**	(46) 04.04.74

MELBOURNE CITY

GOALKEEPERS

1 Tom **GLOVER**	(23) 24.12.97
33 Matthew **SUTTON**	(20) 07.03.00
42 Ahmed **TALEB**	(18) 04.12.02

DEFENDERS

2 Scott **GALLOWAY**	(25) 25.04.95
3 Scott **JAMIESON**	(32) 13.10.88
4 Harrison **DELBRIDGE**	(28) 15.03.92
13 Nathaniel **ATKINSON**	(21) 13.06.99
19 Ben **GARUCCIO**	(25) 15.06.95
22 Curtis **GOOD**	(27) 23.03.93
*36 Kerrin **STOKES**	(18) 11.12.02
*38 Jordan **BOS**	(18) 29.10.02

MIDFIELDERS

7 Rostyn **GRIFFITHS**	(32) 10.03.88
8 Aiden **O'NEILL**	(22) 04.07.98
10 Florin **BERENGUER** (Fra)	(31) 01.04.89
14 Naoki **TSUBAKI** (Jpn)	(20) 23.06.00
16 Taras **GOMULKA**	(19) 16.09.01
18 Connor **METCALFE**	(21) 05.11.99
20 Adrian **LUNA** (Uru)	(28) 12.04.92
*37 Bernardo **OLIVEIRA**	(16) 16.03.04
*39 Idrus **ABDULAHI**	(17) 22.09.03

FORWARDS

9 Jamie **MACLAREN**	(27) 29.07.93
11 Craig **NOONE** (Eng)	(33) 17.11.87
15 Andrew **NABBOUT**	(28) 17.12.92
17 Stefan **COLAKOVSKI**	(20) 20.04.00
23 Marco **TILIO**	(19) 23.08.01
*35 Raphael **BORGES RODRIGUES**	(17) 11.09.03

COACH

Patrick **KISNORBO**	(39) 24.03.81

MELBOURNE VICTORY

GOALKEEPERS

1 Matt **ACTON**	(28) 03.06.92
20 Max **CROCOMBE** (Nzl)	(27) 12.08.93
*30 Marko **BULIC**	(18) 24.05.02

DEFENDERS

2 Storm **ROUX** (Nzl)	(28) 13.01.93
3 Adama **TRAORE** (Civ)	(30) 03.02.90
4 Nick **ANSELL**	(26) 02.02.94
5 Ryan **SHOTTON** (Eng)	(32) 30.10.88
15 Aaron **ANDERSON**	(20) 25.09.00
19 Dylan **RYAN**	(20) 10.06.00
*32 So **NISHIKAWA**	(19) 18.06.01

MIDFIELDERS

6 Leigh **BROXHAM**	(33) 13.01.88
7 Callum **MCMANAMAN** (Eng)	(29) 25.04.91
8 Jacob **BUTTERFIELD** (Eng)	(30) 10.06.90
13 Birkan **KIRDAR**	(29) 25.04.91
14 Jay **BARNETT**	(19) 14.02.01
16 Brandon **LAUTON**	(20) 03.03.00
17 Elvis **KAMSOBA** (Bdi)	(24) 27.06.96
22 Jake **BRIMMER**	(22) 03.04.98
*46 Joshua **VARGA**	(18) 07.02.02

FORWARDS

9 Rudy **GESTEDE** (Ben)	(32) 10.10.88
10 Robin **KRUSE**	(32) 05.10.88
11 Ben **FOLAMI**	(21) 08.06.99
23 Marco **ROJAS** (Nzl)	(29) 05.11.91
*25 Luis **LAWRIE-LATTANZIO**	(18) 20.02.02
*36 Gianluca **IANNUCCI**	(19) 18.06.01
*39 Lleyton **BROOKS**	(19) 21.03.01

COACH

Grant **BREBNER** (Sco)	(42) 06.12.77

NEWCASTLE JETS

GOALKEEPERS

1 Lewis **ITALIANO** (30) 10.12.90
23 Jack **DUNCAN** (27) 19.04.93

DEFENDERS

2 John **KOUTROUMBIS** (22) 06.03.98
3 Jason **HOFFMAN** (31) 28.01.89
4 Nigel **BOOGAARD** (34) 14.08.86
22 Lachlan **JACKSON** (25) 12.03.95
24 Connor **O'TOOLE** (23) 04.07.97
44 Nikolai **TOPOR-STANLEY** (35) 11.03.85

MIDFIELDERS

5 Ben **KANTAROVSKI** (29) 20.01.92
6 Steven **UGARKOVIC** (26) 19.08.94
11 Ramy **NAJJARINE** (20) 23.04.00
14 Ali **ABBAS** (Irq) (34) 30.08.86
*18 Jack **ARMSON**
*25 Jack **SIMMONS** (18) 04.04.02
*27 Lucas **MAURAGIS** (19) 04.09.01
32 Angus **THURGATE** (20) 08.02.00

FORWARDS

9 Roy **O'DONOVAN** (Irl) (35) 10.08.85
13 Maki **PETRATOS** (20) 11.09.00
*15 Tete **YENGI**
17 Valentino **YUEL** (26) 12.10.94
19 Kosta **PETRATOS** (22) 01.03.98
*26 Archie **GOODWIN**

COACH

Craig **DEANS** (46) 07.05.74 (Interim)

PERTH GLORY

GOALKEEPERS

1 Tando **VELAPHI** (33) 17.04.87
33 Liam **REDDY** (39) 08.08.81
50 Cameron **COOK** (19) 16.08.01

DEFENDERS

3 Jonathan **ASPROPOTAMITIS** (24) 07.06.96
4 Darryl **LACHMAN** (Cuw) (31) 11.11.89
5 Nicholas **WALSH** (18) 15.10.02
7 Luke **BODNAR** (20) 19.05.00
13 Osama **MALIK** (30) 30.09.90
22 Joshua **RAWLINS** (16) 23.04.04
23 Dane **INGHAM** (Nzl) (21) 08.06.99
28 Mason **TATAFU** (18) 17.04.02
Kosuke **OTA** (Jpn) (33) 23.07.87

MIDFIELDERS

10 Daniel **STYNES** (22) 29.08.98
11 Declan **HUGHES** (20) 27.05.00
14 Giordano **COLLI** (20) 12.03.00
15 Brandon **WILSON** (23) 28.01.97
16 Nick **SULLIVAN** (22) 25.02.98
17 Diego **CASTRO** (Esp) (38) 02.07.82
19 Chris **IKONOMIDIS** (25) 04.05.95
27 Bryce **BAFFORD** (19) 05.06.01
88 Neil **KILKENNY** (35) 19.12.85

FORWARDS

9 Bruno **FORNAROLI** (Uru) (33) 07.09.87
18 Nicholas **D'AGOSTINO** (22) 25.02.98
25 Carlo **ARMIENTO** (21) 04.06.99
Andy **KEOGH** (Irl) (34) 16.05.86

COACH

Richard **GARCIA** (39) 04.09.81

SYDNEY FC

GOALKEEPERS

1 Andrew **REDMAYNE** (32) 13.01.89
20 Tom **HEWARD-BELLE** (23) 11.03.97
*30 Adam **PAVLESIC** (18) 30.07.02

DEFENDERS

2 Patrick **FLOTTMANN** (23) 19.04.97
3 Ben **WARLAND** (24) 04.09.96
4 Alex **WILKINSON** (36) 13.08.84
6 Ryan **MCGOWAN** (31) 15.08.89
7 Michael **ZULLO** (32) 11.09.88
16 Joel **KING** (20) 30.10.00
21 Harry **VAN DER SAAG** (21) 29.10.99
23 Rhyan **GRANT** (29) 26.02.91

MIDFIELDERS

5 Alex **BAUMJOHANN** (Ger) (33) 23.01.87
8 Paulo **RETRE** (27) 04.03.93
10 Milos **NINKOVIC** (Srb) (36) 25.12.84
17 Anthony **CACERES** (28) 29.09.92
19 Chris **ZUVELA** (24) 21.01.97
26 Luke **BRATTAN** (30) 08.03.90
*28 Calem **NIEUWENHOF** (19) 17.02.01

FORWARDS

9 **BOBO** (Bra) (36) 09.01.85
11 Kosta **BARBAROUSES** (Nzl) (30) 19.02.90
12 Trent **BUHAGIAR** (22) 27.02.98
18 Luke **IVANOVIC** (20) 06.06.00
27 Jordi **SWIBEL** (21) 13.04.99
*33 Pat **WOOD** (18) 16.09.02

COACH

Steve **CORICA** (47) 24.03.73

WELLINGTON PHOENIX

GOALKEEPERS

1 Stefan **MARINOVIC** (Nzl) (29) 07.10.91
20 Oliver **SAIL** (Nzl) (25) 13.01.96

DEFENDERS

2 Liam **MCGING** (22) 11.12.98
3 Luke **DEVERE** (31) 05.11.89
4 Te Atawhai **HUDSON-WIHONGI** (Nzl) (25) 27.03.95
5 James **MCGARRY** (Nzl) (22) 09.04.98
6 Tim **PAYNE** (Nzl) (27) 10.01.94
12 Matthew **RIDENTON** (Nzl) (24) 11.03.96
13 James **MCGARRY** (Nzl) (22) 09.04.98
16 Louis **FENTON** (Nzl) (27) 03.04.93
21 Joshua **LAWS** (22) 26.02.98

MIDFIELDERS

7 Reno **PISCOPO** (22) 27.05.98
8 Cameron **DEVLIN** (22) 07.06.98
10 Ulises **DAVILA** (Mex) (29) 13.04.91
14 Alex **RUFER** (Nzl) (24) 12.06.96
19 Sam **SUTTON** (Nzl) (19) 10.12.01
23 Clayton **LEWIS** (23) 12.02.97

FORWARDS

9 David **BALL** (Eng) (31) 14.12.89
11 Jaushua **SOTIRIO** (25) 11.10.95
15 Mirza **MURATOVIC** (21) 14.01.00
17 Tomer **HEMED** (Isr) (33) 02.05.87
18 Ben **WAINE** (Nzl) (19) 11.06.01

COACH

Ufuk **TALAY** (44) 26.03.76

WESTERN SYDNEY WANDERERS

GOALKEEPERS

20 Vedran **JANJETOVIC** (33) 20.08.87
30 Daniel **MARGUSH** (23) 28.11.97
50 Oliver **KALAC** (18) 09.11.02
Noah **JAMES** (19) 14.02.01

DEFENDERS

2 Ziggy **GORDON** (Sco) (27) 23.04.93
4 Dylan **MCGOWAN** (29) 06.08.91
5 Daniel **GEORGIEVSKI** (Mkd) (32) 17.02.88
6 Tass **MOURDOUKOUTAS** (21) 03.03.99
13 Tate **RUSSELL** (21) 24.08.99
25 Phillip **CANCAR** (19) 11.05.01
*29 Daniel **WILMERING** (20) 19.12.00
*33 Mark **NATTA** (18) 28.11.02
34 Patrick **ZIEGLER** (Ger) (30) 09.02.90
*39 Thomas **AQUILINA** (19) 02.02.01
*Mohamad **AL-TAAY** (20) 15.06.00

MIDFIELDERS

8 Jordan **O'DOHERTY** (23) 14.10.97
14 James **TROISI** (32) 03.07.88
17 Keanu **BACCUS** (22) 07.06.98
18 Graham **DORRANS** (Sco) (33) 05.05.87
23 Kosta **GROZOS** (20) 10.08.00
24 Anthony **LESIOTIS** (20) 20.04.00
*26 Jarrod **CARLUCCIO** (19) 08.02.01
38 Ali **AUGLAH** (18) 11.03.02

FORWARDS

7 Bruce **KAMAU** (25) 28.03.95
9 Bernie **IBINIE** (28) 12.09.92
10 Simon **COX** (Irl) (33) 28.04.87
11 Kwane **YEBOAH** (26) 02.06.94
27 Nicolai **MULLER** (Ger) (33) 25.09.87
*37 Stefan **NIKOLIC** (30) 16.04.90

COACH

Carl **ROBINSON** (Wal) (44) 13.10.76

WESTERN UNITED

GOALKEEPERS

1 Filip **KURTO** (Pol) (29) 14.06.91
30 Ryan **SCOTT** (25) 18.12.95

DEFENDERS

2 Aaron **CALVER** (25) 12.01.96
3 Brendan **HAMILL** (28) 18.09.92
4 Andrew **DURANTE** (Nzl) (38) 03.05.82
5 Dylan **PIERIAS** (20) 20.02.00
6 Tomoki **IMAI** (Jpn) (30) 29.11.90
13 Ivan **VUJICA** (23) 20.04.97
19 Josh **RISDON** (28) 27.07.92
22 Tomislav **USKOK** (29) 22.06.91

MIDFIELDERS

10 Steven **LUSTICA** (29) 12.04.91
14 Max **BURGESS** (26) 16.01.95
17 Joshua **CAVALLO** (21) 13.11.99
20 Victor **SANCHEZ** (Esp) (33) 08.09.87
21 Sebastian **PASQUALI** (21) 07.11.99
23 Alessandro **DIAMANTI** (Ita) (37) 02.05.83
*25 Luke **DUZEL** (18) 05.02.02
*26 Nicolas **MILANOVIC** (19) 14.11.01
27 Jerry **SKOTADIS** (20) 07.03.00

FORWARDS

7 Besart **BERISHA** (Kvx) (35) 29.07.85
8 Lachlan **WALES** (23) 19.10.97
11 Connor **PAIN** (27) 11.11.93
12 Stefan **ZINNI** (24) 06.07.96
*29 Ayom **MAJOK**
33 Apostolos **STAMATELOPOULOS** (21) 09.04.99

COACH

Mark **RUDAN** (45) 27.08.75

Dangerous...Simon Cox made over 500 appearances in England's Football League before joining Western Sydney Wanderers in January 2020

(ages as of 22.01.21)

Club football

EUROPE

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2020-21

Matchday 5

Dec 1: Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 2 Real Madrid (Esp) 0; Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus) 1 RB Salzburg (Aut) 3; Borussia Monchengladbach (Ger) 2 Internazionale (Ita) 3; Marseille (Fra) 2 Olympiakos (Gre) 1; Atletico Madrid (Esp) 1 Bayern Munich (Ger) 1; Liverpool (Eng) 1 Ajax (Ned) 0; Atalanta (Ita) 1 Midtjylland (Den) 1; Porto (Por) 0 Manchester City (Eng) 0

Dec 2: Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 3 RB Leipzig (Ger) 4; Krasnodar (Rus) 1 Rennes (Fra) 0; Manchester United (Eng) 1 Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 3; Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 Lazio (Ita) 1; Ferencvaros (Hun) 0 Barcelona (Esp) 3; Juventus (Ita) 3 Dynamo Kiev (Ukr) 0; Club Brugge (Bel) 3 Zenit (Rus) 0; Sevilla (Esp) 0 Chelsea (Eng) 4

Matchday 6

Dec 8: Zenit (Rus) 1 Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 2; Lazio (Ita) 2 Club Brugge (Bel) 2; Barcelona (Esp) 0 Juventus (Ita) 3; Chelsea (Eng) 1 Krasnodar (Rus) 1; RB Leipzig (Ger) 3 Manchester United (Eng) 2; Dynamo Kiev (Ukr) 1 Ferencvaros (Hun) 0; Rennes (Fra) 1 Sevilla (Esp) 3

Dec 9: Midtjylland (Den) 1 Liverpool (Eng) 1; Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 5 Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 1; Ajax (Ned) 0 Atalanta (Ita) 1; Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus); Real Madrid (Esp) 2 Borussia Monchengladbach (Ger) 0; RB Salzburg (Aut) 0 Atletico Madrid (Esp) 2; Manchester City (Eng) 3 Marseille (Fra) 0; Internazionale (Ita) 0 Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 0; Olympiakos (Gre) 0 Porto (Por) 0

GROUP A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bayern Munich	6	5	1	0	18	5	16
Atletico Madrid	6	2	3	1	7	8	9
RB Salzburg	6	1	1	4	10	17	4
Lokomotiv	6	0	3	3	5	10	3

GROUP B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Madrid	6	3	1	2	11	9	10
B. M'gladbach	6	2	2	2	16	9	8
Shakhtar Donetsk	6	2	2	2	5	12	8
Internazionale	6	1	3	2	7	9	6

GROUP C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Manchester City	6	5	1	0	13	1	16
Porto	6	4	1	1	10	3	13
Olympiakos	6	1	0	5	2	10	3
Marseille	6	1	0	5	2	13	3

GROUP D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	6	4	1	1	10	3	13
Atalanta	6	3	2	1	10	8	11
Ajax	6	2	1	3	7	7	7
Midtjylland	6	0	2	4	4	13	2

GROUP E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Chelsea	6	4	2	0	14	2	14
Sevilla	6	4	1	1	9	8	13
Krasnodar	6	1	2	3	6	11	5
Rennes	6	0	1	5	3	11	1

GROUP F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
B. Dortmund	6	4	1	1	12	5	13
Lazio	6	2	4	0	11	7	10
Club Brugge	6	2	2	2	8	10	8
Zenit	6	0	1	5	4	13	1

GROUP G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Juventus	6	5	0	1	14	4	15
Barcelona	6	5	0	1	16	5	15
Dynamo Kiev	6	1	1	4	4	13	4
Ferencvaros	6	0	1	5	5	17	1

GROUP H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PSG	6	4	0	2	13	6	12
RB Leipzig	6	4	0	2	11	12	12
Manchester United	6	3	0	3	15	10	9
Istanbul Basaksehir	6	1	0	5	7	18	3

EUROPA LEAGUE 2020-21

Matchday 5

Dec 3: Sivasspor (Tur) 0 Villarreal (Esp) 1; Milan (Ita) 4 Celtic (Sco) 2; Qarabag (Aze) 1 Maccabi Tel-Aviv (Isr) 1; Zorya Luhansk (Ukr) 1 Leicester City (Eng) 0; AEK Athens (Gre) 2 Braga (Por) 4; Gent (Bel) 1 Slovan Liberec (Cze) 2; Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 0 Hoffenheim (Ger) 0; Lille (Fra) 2 Sparta Prague (Cze) 1; CSKA Moscow (Rus) 0 Wolfsberg (Aut) 1; Feyenoord (Ned) 0 Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 2; LASK (Aut) 3 Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 3; Royal Antwerp (Bel) 3 Ludogorets (Bul) 1; Rangers (Sco) 3 Standard Liege (Bel) 2; CFR Cluj (Rou) 0 CSKA Sofia (Bul) 0; AZ (Ned) 1 Napoli (Ita) 1; Slavia Prague (Cze) 3 Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 0; Granada (Esp) 0 PSV (Ned) 1; Molde (Nor) 3 Dundalk (Irl) 1; Real Sociedad (Esp) 2 Rijeka (Cro) 2; Roma (Ita) 3 Young Boys (Sui) 1; Benfica (Por) 4 Lech Poznan (Pol) 0; Nice (Fra) 2 Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 3; Omonia (Cyp) 2 PAOK (Gre) 1; Arsenal (Eng) 4 Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1

Matchday 6

Dec 10: Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 4 Slavia Prague (Cze) 0; CSKA Sofia (Bul) 3 Roma (Ita) 1; Standard Liege (Bel) 2 Benfica (Por) 2; Dundalk (Irl) 2 Arsenal (Eng) 4; Lech Poznan (Pol) 0 Rangers (Sco) 2; PSV (Ned) 4 Omonia (Cyp) 0; Rijeka (Cro) 2 AZ (Ned) 1; Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2 Molde (Nor) 2; PAOK (Gre) 0 Granada (Esp) 0; Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 1 Nice (Fra) 0; Napoli (Ita) 1 Real Sociedad (Esp) 1; Young Boys (Sui) 2 CFR Cluj (Rou) 1; Sparta Prague (Cze) 0 Milan (Ita) 1; Ludogorets (Bul) 1 LASK (Aut) 3; Hoffenheim (Ger) 4 Gent (Bel) 1; Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 3 CSKA Moscow (Rus) 1; Celtic (Sco) 3 Lille (Fra) 2; Maccabi Tel-Aviv (Isr) 1 Sivasspor (Tur) 0; Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 2 Royal Antwerp (Bel) 0; Braga (Por) 2 Zorya Luhansk (Ukr) 0; Wolfsberg (Aut) 1 Feyenoord (Ned) 0; Slovan Liberec (Cze) 0 Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 0; Leicester City (Eng) 2 AEK Athens (Gre) 0; Villarreal (Esp) *p* Qarabag (Aze) *p*

GROUP A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Roma	6	4	1	1	13	5	13
Young Boys	6	3	1	2	9	7	10
CFR Cluj	6	1	2	3	4	10	5
CSKA Sofia	6	1	2	3	3	7	5

GROUP B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Arsenal	6	6	0	0	20	5	18
Molde	6	3	1	2	9	11	10
Rapid Vienna	6	2	1	3	11	13	7
Dundalk	6	0	0	6	8	19	0

GROUP C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bayer Leverkusen	6	5	0	1	21	8	15
Slavia Prague	6	4	0	2	11	10	12
Hapoel Be'er Sheva	6	2	0	4	7	13	6
Nice	6	1	0	5	8	16	3

GROUP D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rangers	6	4	2	0	13	7	14
Benfica	6	3	3	0	18	9	12
Standard Liege	6	1	1	4	7	14	4
Lech Poznan	6	1	0	5	6	14	3

GROUP E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PSV	6	4	0	2	12	9	12
Granada	6	3	2	1	6	3	11
PAOK	6	1	3	2	8	7	6
Omonia	6	1	1	4	5	12	4

GROUP F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Napoli	6	3	2	1	7	4	11
Real Sociedad	6	2	3	1	5	4	9
AZ	6	2	2	2	7	5	8
Rijeka	6	1	1	4	6	12	4

GROUP G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Leicester City	6	4	1	1	14	5	13
Braga	6	4	1	1	14	10	13
Zorya Luhansk	6	2	0	4	6	11	6
AEK Athens	6	1	0	5	7	15	3

GROUP H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Milan	6	4	1	1	12	7	13
Lille	6	3	2	1	14	8	11
Sparta Prague	6	2	0	4	10	12	6
Celtic	6	1	1	4	10	19	4

GROUP I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Villarreal	5	4	1	0	14	5	13
Maccabi Tel-Aviv	6	3	2	1	6	7	11
Sivasspor	6	2	0	4	9	11	6
Qarabag	5	0	1	4	4	10	1

GROUP J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tottenham	6	4	1	1	15	5	13
Royal Antwerp	6	4	0	2	8	5	12
LASK	6	3	1	2	11	12	10
Ludogorets	6	0	0	6	7	19	0

GROUP K

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dinamo Zagreb	6	4	2	0	9	1	14
Wolfsberg	6	3	1	2	7	6	10
Feyenoord	6	1	2	3	4	8	5
CSKA Moscow	6	0	3	3	3	8	3

GROUP L

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hoffenheim	6	5	1	0	17	2	16
Red Star Belgrade	6	3	2	1	9	4	11
Slovan Liberec	6	2	1	3	4	13	7
Gent	6	0	0	6	4	15	0

CONCACAF

USA: MLS CUP PLAY-OFFS

Eastern Conference Play-In Round

Nov 20 - Massachusetts
New England Revolution 2 (Gil 38, Bou 90+5)
Montreal Impact 1 (Quioto 61)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Marrufo (USA)
New England Revolution: Turner - Buchanan (Caldwell 50), Farrell, Kessler, Jones, McNamara (Nguyen 63), Polster, Gil, Bou, Bunbury (Rennicks 86), Buksa.
Montreal Impact: Diop - Brault-Guillard, Fanni, Binks, Corrales (Kizza 46), Sejdic, Camacho, Maciel (Okwonkwo 57), Jackson-Hamel (Toye 57), Quioto, Bojan.

Nov 21 - Tennessee
Nashville 3 (Leal 14, Mukhtar 24 pen, McCarty 57)
Inter Miami 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Elfath (USA)
Nashville: Willis - Zimmerman, Lovitz, Romney, McCarty, Godoy (Anunga 74), Mukhtar (Jones 67), Leal (Bwana 67), Muyl (Washington 80), Johnston, Cadiz (Rios 67).
Inter Miami: McCarthy - DeLaGarza, Powell, Ambrose (Sweat 76), Figal, Nealis (Pellegrini 33), Matuidi, Pizarro, Trapp (Ulloa 63), Morgan, Agudelo (Carranza 63).

Western Conference First Round

Nov 22 - Kansas
Sporting Kansas City 3* (Espinoza 4, Ilie 47, Busio 90+1)
San Jose Earthquakes 3 (Fierro 22, Salinas 34, Wondolowski 90+7)
**Sporting Kansas City win 3-0 on penalties (aet)*
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Saghafi (USA)
Sporting Kansas City: Melia - Reid, Puncec, Dia, Lindsey, Espinoza (Hernandez 90+3), Ilie, Busio (Kinda 98), Russell, Gerso Fernandes (Hurtado 90+3), Shelton.
San Jose Earthquakes: Marcinkowski - Jungwirth, Alanis, Lopez (Thompson 102), Lima, Salinas (Cowell 87), Judson (Calvillo 115), Espinoza, Yueill, Wondolowski, Fierro (Rios 87).

Nov 22 - Minnesota
Minnesota United 3 (Molino 22, 79, Lod 54)
Colorado Rapids 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Unkel (USA)
Minnesota United: St Clair - Boxall, Dibassy, Gasper, Gregus, Molino, Lod, Finlay (Kamara 68), Hairston (Alonso 80), Reynoso (Hayes 83), Dotson.
Colorado Rapids: Yarbrough - Wilson, Rosenberry, Abubakar, Acosta (Mezquida 81), Price, Namli (Vines 72), Lewis (Benezet 46), Bassett, Rubio, Andre Shinyashiki (Galvan 81).

Nov 22 - Oregon
Portland Timbers 1 (Villafana 82)
FC Dallas 1* (Pepi 90+3)
**FC Dallas win 8-7 on penalties (aet)*
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Villarreal (USA)
Portland Timbers: Clark - Mabiala, Villafana, Zuparic, Bonilla (Farfan 94), Valeri, D. Chara, Y. Chara (Loria 95), Williamson (Paredes 45), Mora (Ebobisse 88), Polo (Bodily 105).
FC Dallas: Maurer - Bressan, Hedges, Hollingshead, Nelson (Pepi 85), Reynolds, Ricaurte (Twumasi 80), Thiago Santos (Barrios 86), Jara, Picault (Ziegler 110), Ferreira (Tessmann 61).

Nov 24 - Washington
Seattle Sounders 3 (Lodeiro 18, Ruidiaz 66, Morris 80)
Los Angeles FC 1 (Atuesta 77)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Stott (USA)
Seattle Sounders: Frei - O'Neill, Gomez, Tolo (Torres 90+1), Lodeiro, Jones (Smith 70), Joao Paulo, C. Roldan, A. Roldan, Ruidiaz, Morris (Delem 90).
Los Angeles FC: Sisniega - Harvey (Mohammed Mounir 56), Murillo (Ginella 73), Segura, Blackmon, Kaye, Atuesta, Vela, Wright-Phillips (Opoku 46), Blessing, Torres (Perez 55).

Eastern Conference First Round

Nov 21 - Florida
Orlando City 1* (Nani 5 pen)
New York City 1 (Chanot 8)
**Orlando City win 6-5 on penalties (aet)*
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Chapman (USA)
Orlando City: Gallese - Jansson, Antonio Carlos, Smith (Schlegel 101), Ruan, Nani, Pereyra (Michel 105), Junior Urso, Oriol Rosell (Perea 83), Mueller (Miller 90+4), Dike (Akindele 83).
Sent off: Ruan 87, Gallese 120+8.
New York City: Johnson - Tinnerholm (Ibeagha 90+5), Callens (Scally 120+1), Chanot, Matarrita (Thorarinsson 114), Moralez, Ring (Rocha 114), Medina, Parks (Acevedo 90+5), Mackay-Steven (Ismael Tajouri 90+5), Castellanos.

Nov 21 - Ohio
Columbus Crew 3 (Pedro Santos 26 pen, Nagbe 46, Zardes 68)
New York Red Bulls 2 (Clark 23, White 90)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Chilowicz (USA)
Columbus Crew: Room - Afful, Mensah, Williams, Valenzuela, Pedro Santos, Nagbe, Zelarayan, Etienne (Diaz 81), Artur, Zardes.
New York Red Bulls: Meara - Parker, Long, Duncan, Pendant, Royer (White 59), Valot (Romero 76), Davis (Rzatkowski 76), Yearwood (Casseres 51), Clark (Stroud 76), Barlow.

Nov 24 - Connecticut
Toronto 0
Nashville 1 (Rios 108)
After extra-time
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sibiga (USA)
Toronto: Westberg - Gonzalez (Fraser 111), Mavinga, Auro (Gallacher 101), Bradley, Piatti (Priso-Mbongue 101), DeLeon (Akinola 62), Pozuelo, Osorio, Laryea (Gallardo 111), Altidore (Mullins 82).
Nashville: Willis - Zimmerman, Lovitz, Romney, McCarty, Mukhtar (LaGrassa 111), Leal (Anibaba 118), Muyl (Washington 105+1), Anunga (Jones 105+1), Johnston, Cadiz (Rios 71).

Nov 24 - Pennsylvania
Philadelphia Union 0
New England Revolution 2 (Buksa 26, Buchanan 30)

HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Dickerson (USA)
Philadelphia Union: Blake - Gaddis (Fontana 76), Glesnes, Wagner, McKenzie, Bedoya, Jamiro, Jose Martinez (Ilsinho 46), Aaronson (Elliott 62), Przybylko, Sergio Santos (Burke 62).
New England Revolution: Turner - Farrell, Kessler, Jones, Carles Gil (Mancienne 89), Caldwell, Polster, Buchanan, Bou (McNamara 78), Bunbury (Rowe 66), Buksa (Rennicks 89).

Western Conference Semi-Finals

Dec 1 - Washington
Seattle Sounders 1 (O'Neill 49)
FC Dallas 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sibiga (USA)
Seattle Sounders: Frei - O'Neill, Gomez, Tolo, Lodeiro, Jones (Leerdam 68), Joao Paulo (Torres 87), C. Roldan, A. Roldan, Ruidiaz, Morris (Smith 90+1).
FC Dallas: Maurer - Bressan, Hedges, Hollingshead, Nelson (Barrios 58), Reynolds, Ricaurte, Thiago Santos (Ferreira 87), Tessmann (Mosquera 81), Jara, Picault (Pepi 80).

Dec 3 - Kansas
Sporting Kansas City 0
Minnesota United 3 (Molino 27, 35, Dibassy 39)
HT: 0-3. **Ref:** Fischer (Can)
Sporting Kansas City: Melia - Reid, Puncec, Dia (Luis Martins 56), Lindsey, Espinoza (Hernandez 78), Ilie, Busio (Kinda 56), Russell, Gerso Fernandes (Hurtado 68), Shelton.
Minnesota United: St Clair - Boxall, Metanire, Dibassy, Gasper, Alonso (Dotson 72), Gregus, Molino (Hayes 88), Lod, Finlay, Reynoso (Hairston 80).

Eastern Conference Semi-Finals

Nov 29 - Florida
Orlando City 1 (Urso 33)
New England Revolution 3 (Carles Gil 17 pen, Bou 26, 86)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Chilowicz (USA)
Orlando City: Rowe - Jansson, Antonio Carlos, Smith (Michel 78), Miller, Nani, Pereyra, Junior Urso (Robinho 87), Oriol Rosell (Perea 66), Mueller (Akindele 78), Dike. *Sent off: Pereyra 60.*
New England Revolution: Turner - Farrell, Kessler, Jones, Carles Gil, Caldwell (McNamara 90), Polster (Nguyen 78), Buchanan (Bye 67), Bou, Bunbury (Rowe 67), Buksa (Mancienne 90).

Nov 29 - Ohio
Columbus Crew 2 (Pedro Santos 99, Zardes 103)
Nashville 0
After extra-time
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Villarreal (USA)
Columbus Crew: Tarbell - Afful, Mensah, Williams, Valenzuela, Pedro Santos, Nagbe, Zelarayan (Cadden 116), Artur, Diaz (Boateng 109), Zardes (Nemeth 113).
Nashville: Willis - Zimmerman, Lovitz, Romney, McCarty, Mukhtar, Leal (Washington 90), Muyl (Bwana 105), Anunga (Jones 73), Johnston (Miller 105), Cadiz (Rios 90).

Western Conference Final

Dec 7 - Washington
Seattle Sounders 3 (Bruin 75, Ruidiaz 89, Svensson 90+3)
Minnesota United 2 (Reynoso 29, Dibassy 67)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Elfath (USA)
Seattle Sounders: Frei - Roldan, Gomez, O'Neill, Tolo (Smith 70), Roldan (Leerdam 70), Paulo (Bruin 73), Jones (Svensson 77), Lodeiro, Morris, Ruidiaz.
Minnesota United: Clair - Metanire (Dotson 40), Boxall, Dibassy, Gasper, Gregus, Alonso, Finlay (Kamara 69), Reynoso, Molino, Lod (Schoenfeld 90+4).

Eastern Conference Final

Dec 6 - Ohio
Columbus Crew 1 (Artur 59)
New England Revolution 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Villarreal (USA)
Columbus Crew: Tarbell - Afful, Mensah, Williams, Valenzuela, Nagbe, Artur, Diaz (Boateng 80), Zelarayan, Santos, Zardes.
New England Revolution: Turner - Buchanan (Rowe 70), Farrell, Kessler, Jones (Rennicks 85), Caldwell (McNamara 70), Polster, Gil, Bou, Bunbury (Bye 61), Buksa.

MLS Cup Final

Dec 12 - Ohio
Columbus Crew 3 (Zelarayan 25, 82, Etienne 31)
Seattle Sounders 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Marrufo (USA)
Columbus Crew: Room - Afful, Mensah, Williams, Valenzuela, Zelarayan, Etienne (Jimenez 83), Artur (Alashe 88), Morris, Diaz (Francis 90), Zardes.
Seattle Sounders: Frei - O'Neill (Medranda 77), Gomez, Tolo (Smith 46), Lodeiro, Jones (Svensson 46), Joao Paulo (Bruin 60), C. Roldan, A. Roldan (Leerdam 60), Ruidiaz, Morris.

MEXICO

LIGA MX 2020-21

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Leon (C)	17	12	4	1	27	14	40
Pumas UNAM	17	8	8	1	29	17	32
America	17	9	5	3	31	22	32
Cruz Azul	17	9	2	6	23	16	29
Monterrey	17	8	5	4	26	21	29
Tigres UANL	17	7	7	3	27	16	28
Guadalajara	17	7	5	5	20	17	26
Santos Laguna	17	7	4	6	24	20	25
Pachuca	17	6	7	4	18	14	25
Necaxa	17	7	3	7	16	20	24
Toluca	17	6	3	8	23	28	21
Puebla	17	6	2	9	22	25	20
Juarez	17	4	7	6	16	19	19
Mazatlan	17	4	4	9	24	31	16
Tijuana	17	4	3	10	12	27	15
Atlas	17	3	5	9	13	20	14
Queretaro	17	3	4	10	23	28	13
Atletico San Luis	17	3	2	12	16	35	11

GUARDIANES 2020 FINAL PHASE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Nov 25 - Puebla
Puebla 2 (Fernandez 1, Mosquera 37 og)
Leon 1 (Mena 43 pen)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Miranda (Mex)

Nov 25 - Zapopan
Guadalajara 1 (Calderon 81)
America 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Rojas (Mex)

Nov 26 - San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres 1 (Pizarro 46)
Cruz Azul 3 (Escobar 30, Rodriguez 54, Romo 71)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Montano (Mex)

Nov 26 - Pachuca
Pachuca 0
Pumas UNAM 1 (Alvarez 7)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Galvan (Mex)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Nov 28 - Leon
Leon 2 **(3)** (Perg 5 og, Mena 30)
Puebla 0 **(2)**
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Ramos (Mex)

Nov 28 - Mexico City
America 1 **(1)** (Martin 75)
Guadalajara 2 **(3)** (Calderon 31, 72)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Perez (Mex)

Nov 29 - Mexico City
Pumas UNAM 0 **(1)**
Pachuca 0 **(0)**
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Hernandez (Mex)

Nov 29 - Mexico City
Cruz Azul 0 **(3)**
Tigres UANL 1 **(2)** (Quinones 83)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ortiz (Mex)

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Dec 2 - Zapopan
Guadalajara 1 (Macias 52 pen)
Leon 1 (Navarro 38)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Ortiz (Mex)

Dec 3 - Mexico City
Cruz Azul 4 (Alvarado 2, Baca 8, Romo 13, 90+5)
Pumas UNAM 0
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Rojas (Mex)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Dec 5 - Leon
Leon 1 **(2)** (Campbell 18)
Guadalajara 0 **(1)**
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Montano (Mex)

Dec 6 - Mexico City
Pumas UNAM 4 **(4)*** (Dinenno 4, 37, Gonzalez 41, Vigon 89)
Cruz Azul 0 **(4)**
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Ramos (Mex)
**Pumas UNAM progress after finishing higher in the regular league standings*

Final – 1st Leg

Dec 10 - Mexico City
Pumas UNAM 1 (Gonzalez 72)
Leon 1 (Gigliotti 89)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Hernandez (Mex)

Final – 2nd Leg

Dec 14 - Leon de los Aldamas
Leon 2 **(3)** (Gigliotti 12, Moreno 83)
Pumas UNAM 0 **(1)**
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Perez (Mex)

SOUTH AMERICA

COPA LIBERTADORES 2020

Round of 16 – 1st Leg

Nov 24 - Curitiba
Athletico Paranaense 1 (Bissoli 57)
River Plate 1 (Diaz 90)
HT: 0-0. Ref: Rojas (Col)

Nov 24 - Quito
LDU Quito 1 (Julio 45+2)
Santos 2 (Soteldo 7, Marinho 59 pen)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Rapallini (Arg)

Nov 24 - Avellaneda
Racing Club 1 (Fertoli 13)
Flamengo 1 (Barbosa 15)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Herrera (Ven)

Nov 25 - Manta
Delfin 1 (Ramires 69 og)
Palmeiras 3 (Gabriel Menino 18, Rony 36 pen, Ze Rafael 60)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Gonzalez (Uru)

Nov 25 - Quito
Independiente Medellin 0
Nacional 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Raphael Claus (Bra)

Nov 25 - Asuncion
Libertad 3 (Enciso 46, Cardozo 69, Martinez 90+6)
Jorge Wilstermann 1 (Osorio 74)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Anderson Daronco (Bra)

Nov 26 - Asuncion
Guarani 0
Gremio 2 (Jean Pyerre 56, Pepe 86)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Guerrero (Ecu)

Dec 2 - Porto Alegre
Internacional 0
Boca Juniors 1 (Tevez 63)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ostojich (Uru)

Round of 16 – 2nd Leg

Dec 1 - Buenos Aires
River Plate 1 **(2)** (De La Cruz 84)
Athletico Paranaense 0 **(1)**
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Valenzuela (Ven)

Dec 1 - Sao Paulo
Santos 0 **(2)***
LDU Quito 1 **(2)** (Zunino 66)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Pitana (Arg)
**Santos win on away goals*

Dec 1 - Rio deJaneiro
Flamengo 1 **(2)** (Willian Arao 90+3)
Racing Club 1 **(2)*** (Sigali 65)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Tobar (Chi)
**Racing Club win 5-3 on penalties*

Dec 2 - Sao Paulo
Palmeiras 5 **(8)** (De Paula 29, Veron 49, 60, Willian 52, Danilo 90+3)
Delfin 0 **(1)**
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Herrera (Arg)

Dec 2 - Montevideo
Nacional 0 **(0)***
Independiente Medellin 0 **(0)**
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Benitez (Par)
**Nacional win 4-2 on penalties*

Dec 2 - Cochabamba
Jorge Wilstermann 0 **(1)**
Libertad 2 **(5)** (Cardozo 67, 79)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Loustau (Arg)

Dec 3 - Rio Grande do Sul
Gremio 2 **(4)** (Ferreira 3, Rodrigues 90+7)
Guarani 0 **(0)**
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Roldan (Col)

Dec 9 - Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors 0 **(1)***
Internacional 1 (1) (Fabra 48 og)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Tobar (Chi)
**BocaJuniors win 5-4 on penalties*

ASIA

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2020

East Region

Group E

Nov 21 - Al Rayyan
FC Seoul 1 (Chu-young 66 pen)
Beijing Guoan 2 (Fernardo 8, Alan 60)

Nov 24 - Doha
Beijing Guoan 3 (Renato Augusto 22, Alan 34, Wang Ziming 74)
Melbourne Victory 1 (Iannucci 78)

Nov 24 - Doha
FC Seoul 5 (Seung-gyu 20, Han-min 54, Ju-tae 67, 71, In-gyu 90+2)
Chiangrai United 0

Nov 27 - Doha
Melbourne Victory 0
Beijing Guoan 2 (Jonathan Viera 9, Zhang Yuning 35)

Nov 27 - Doha
Chiangrai United 2 (Bill 40, 89)
FC Seoul 1 (Chu-Young 59)

Nov 30 - Doha
Beijing Guoan 3 (Viera 23, Renato Augusto 43, Zhang Yuning 90+3)
FC Seoul 1 (Ju-tae 89)

Nov 30 - Doha
Chiangrai United 2 (Tiatrakul 47, Verzura 82)
Melbourne Victory 2 (Brimmer 8 pen, Folami 27)

Dec 3 - Doha
Beijing Guoan 1 (Alan 76)
Chiangrai United 1 (Punya 55)

Dec 3 - Al Rayyan
Melbourne Victory 2 (Rojas 5, Brimmer 23 pen)
FC Seoul 1 (Hyun-Soo 64)

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE GROUP E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Beijing Guoan	6	5	1	0	12	4	16
Melbourne Victory	6	2	1	3	6	9	7
FC Seoul	6	2	0	4	10	9	6
Chiangrai United	6	1	2	3	5	11	5

Group F

Nov 18 - Al Rayyan
Perth Glory 1 (Aspropotamitis 81)
Shanghai Shenhua 2 (Xinli 7, Yu Hanchao 38)

Nov 21 - Al Rayyan
Ulsan Hyundai 3 (Bit-garam 19, 41, Ki-hee 63)
Shanghai Shenhua 1 (Zhu Jianrong 89)

Nov 24 - Al Rayyan
FC Tokyo 0
Shanghai Shenhua 1 (Yu Hanchao 72 pen)

Nov 24 - Al Rayyan
Perth Glory 1 (Stynes 71)
Ulsan Hyundai 2 (In-sung 89, Junior Negrao 90+3)

Nov 27 - Al Rayyan
Ulsan Hyundai 2 (In-sung 87, Junior Negrao 89)
Perth Glory 0

Nov 27 - Al Rayyan
Shanghai Shenhua 1 (Moreno 86)
FC Tokyo 2 (Leandro 61, Abe 82)

Nov 30 - Al Rayyan
FC Tokyo 1 (Nagai 1)
Ulsan Hyundai 2 (Bit-garam 44, 85)

Nov 30 - Al Rayyan
Shanghai Shenhua 3 (Moreno 62, 72, Yu Hanchao 73)
Perth Glory 3 (Fornaroli 45+2, Armiento 58, Kilkenny 86 pen)

Dec 3 - Doha
Shanghai Shenhua 1 (Bi Jinhao 60)
Ulsan Hyundai 4 (Jeong-in 3, Sang-heon 24, Johnsen 75 pen, 90)

Dec 3 - Al Rayyan
Perth Glory 0
FC Tokyo 1 (Adailton 8)

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE GROUP F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ulsan Hyundai	6	5	1	0	14	5	16
FC Tokyo	6	3	1	2	6	5	10
Shanghai Shenhua	6	2	1	3	9	13	7
Perth Glory	6	0	1	5	5	11	1

Group G

Nov 22 - Doha
Suwon Bluewings 0
Guangzhou Evergrande 0

Nov 25 - Doha
Guangzhou Evergrande 1 (Furuhashi 55 og)
Vissel Kobe 3 (Furuhashi 44, Douglas 74, Iniesta 84)

Nov 28 - Al-Wakrah
Vissel Kobe 0
Guangzhou Evergrande 2 (Talisca 17 pen, Ai Kesen 36)

Dec 1 - Doha
Guangzhou Evergrande 1 (Wei Shihao 72)
Suwon Bluewings 1 (Sang-hyub 53)

Dec 4 - Doha
Vissel Kobe 0
Suwon Bluewings 2 (Gun-hee 49, Sang-hyub 68 pen)

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE GROUP G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vissel Kobe	4	2	0	2	4	5	6
Guangzhou Evergrande	4	1	2	1	3	2	5
Suwon Bluewings	4	1	2	1	4	4	5
Johor Darul Ta'zim*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Johor Darul Ta'zim withdrew meaning all their matches were deemed null and void*

Group H

Nov 19 - Doha
Sydney FC 1 (Buhagiar 8)
Shanghai SIPG 2 (Li Shenglong 63, 79)

Nov 22 - Doha
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 1 (Gustavo 24)
Shanghai SIPG 2 (Lu Wenjun 11, Hulk 82 pen)

Nov 25 - Al-Wakrah
Shanghai SIPG 0
Yokohama F. Marinos 1 (Amano 90)

Nov 25 - Al-Wakrah
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 1 (Sung-eun 44)
Sydney FC 0

Nov 28 - Al-Wakrah
Yokohama F. Marinos 1 (Onaiwu 21)
Shanghai SIPG 2 (Cai Huikang 14, Ricardo Lopes 55)

Dec 1 - Al-Wakrah
Yokohama F. Marinos 4 (Bunmathan 17, Marcos Junior 51, Nakagawa 71, Bum-keun 83 og)
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 1 (Gustavo 54 pen)

Dec 1 - Al-Wakrah
Shanghai SIPG 0
Sydney FC 4 (Wilkinson 28, Brattan 33, Buhagiar 57, 60)

Dec 4 - Al-Wakrah
Sydney FC 1 (Buhagiar 29)
Yokohama F. Marinos 1 (Saneto 18)

Dec 4 - Doha
Shanghai SIPG 0
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 2 (Gue-sung 16, 32 pen)

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE GROUP H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Yokohama F. Marinos	6	4	1	1	13	5	13
Shanghai SIPG	6	3	0	3	6	10	9
Jeonbuk	6	2	1	3	8	10	7
Sydney FC	6	1	2	3	8	10	5

Round of 16

Dec 6 - Al Rayyan
Beijing Guoan 1 (Alan 59)
FC Tokyo 0

Dec 6 - Al Rayyan
Ulsan Hyundai 3 (Johnsen 65, 86, Du-jae 77)
Melbourne Victory 0

Dec 7 - Doha
Vissel Kobe 2 (Iniesta 31, Nishi 50)
Shanghai SIPG 0

Dec 7 - Doha
Yokohama F. Marinos 2 (Erik 20, Onaiwu 90+1)
Suwon Bluewings 3 (Tae-hwan 57, Min-woo 82, Suk-jong 87)

Quarter-Finals

Dec 10 - Al Wakrah
Ulsan Hyundai 2 (Junior Negrao 21 pen, 42)
Beijing Guoan 0

Dec 10 - Al Wakrah
Vissel Kobe 1* (Furuhashi 40)
Suwon Bluewings 1 (Sang-hyeok 7)
**Vissel Kobe win 7-6 on penalties (aet)*

Semi-Final

Dec 13 - Doha
Ulsan Hyundai 2 (Johnsen 81, Junior Negrao 119 pen)
Vissel Kobe 1 (Yamaguchi 52)
After extra-time

Final

Dec 19 - Al Wakrah
Perspolis 1 (Abdi 45)
Ulsan 2 (Junior Negrao 45+4, 55 pen)

CHINESE SUPER LEAGUE
GROUP A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guangzhou E.	14	11	1	2	31	12	34
Jiangsu Suning* (C)	14	7	5	2	23	15	26
Shandong Luneng	14	7	3	4	19	11	24
Shanghai Shenhua	14	5	6	3	16	15	21
Shenzhen	14	5	2	7	20	20	17
Guangzhou R&F	14	4	3	7	14	28	15
Dalian Pro	14	2	5	7	18	21	11
Henan Jianye	4	1	3	10	14	33	6

**Jiangsu Suning win the title after winning the Championship stage play-offs*

CHINESE SUPER LEAGUE
GROUP B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shanghai SIPG	14	10	2	2	26	11	32
Beijing Guoan	14	8	4	2	36	19	28
Chongqing Dangdai	14	7	3	4	22	19	24
Hebei China Fortune	14	7	3	4	25	23	24
Wuhan Zall*	14	5	2	7	16	16	17
Shijiazhuang* (R)	14	4	5	5	18	21	17
Qiangdao Huanghai	14	2	4	8	15	27	10
Tianjin TEDA	14	0	3	11	8	30	3

**Shijiazhuang Ever Bright are relegated after losing in the relegation stage play-offs*

JAPAN
J.LEAGUE 1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kawasaki Frontale (C)	34	26	5	3	88	31	83
Gamba Osaka	34	20	5	9	46	42	65
Nagoya Grampus	34	19	6	9	45	28	63
Cerezo Osaka	34	18	6	10	46	37	60
Kashima Antlers	34	18	5	11	55	44	59
FC Tokyo	34	17	6	11	47	42	57
Kashiwa Reysol	34	15	7	12	60	46	52
Sanfrecce Hiroshima	34	13	9	12	46	37	48
Yokohama F. Marinos	34	14	5	15	69	59	47
Urawa Red Diamonds	34	13	7	14	43	56	46
Oita Trinita	34	11	10	13	36	45	43
Consadole Sapporo	34	10	9	15	47	58	39
Sagan Tosu	34	7	15	12	37	43	36
Vissel Kobe	34	9	9	16	50	59	36
Yokohama FC	34	9	6	19	38	60	33
Shimizu S-Pulse	34	7	7	20	48	70	28
Vegalta Sendai	34	6	10	18	36	61	28
Shonan Bellmare	34	6	9	19	29	48	27

JAPAN
J.LEAGUE 2

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tokushima Vortis (P)	42	25	9	8	67	33	84
Avispa Fukuoka (P)	42	25	9	8	51	29	84
V-Varen Nagasaki	42	23	11	8	66	39	80
Ventforet Kofu	42	16	17	9	50	41	65
Giravanz Kitakyushu	42	19	8	15	59	51	65
Jubilo Iwata	42	16	15	11	58	47	63
Montedio Yamagata	42	17	11	14	59	42	62
Kyoto Sanga	42	16	11	15	47	45	59
Mito HollyHock	42	16	10	16	68	62	58
Tochigi SC	42	15	13	14	41	39	58
Albirex Niigata	42	14	15	13	55	55	57
Tokyo Verdy	42	13	15	14	48	48	54
Matsumoto Yamaga	42	13	15	14	44	52	54
JEF United Chiba	42	15	8	19	47	51	53
Omiya Ardija	42	14	11	17	43	52	53
FC Ryukyu	42	14	8	20	58	61	50
Fagiano Okayama	42	12	14	16	39	49	50
Zweigen Kanazawa	42	12	13	17	57	67	49
Machida Zelvia	42	12	13	17	41	52	49
Thespakusatsu Gunma	42	15	4	23	40	62	49
Ehime FC	42	8	10	24	38	68	34
Renofa Yamaguchi	42	9	6	27	43	74	33

SOUTH KOREA
K LEAGUE 1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jeonbuk (C)	27	19	3	5	46	21	60
Ulsan Hyundai	27	17	6	4	54	23	57
Pohang Steelers	27	15	5	7	56	35	50
Sangju Sangmu* (R)	27	13	5	9	34	36	44
Daegu FC	27	10	8	9	43	39	38
Gwangju FC	27	6	7	14	25	35	25
Gangwon FC	27	9	7	11	32	46	34
Suwon Bluewings	27	8	7	12	36	21	31
FC Seoul	27	8	5	14	27	30	29
Seongnam FC	27	7	7	13	23	44	28
Incheon United	27	7	6	14	24	37	27
Busan IPark (R)	27	5	10	12	25	37	25

**Sangju Sangmu are relegated to K League 2 after moving its franchise city for the 2021 season*

SOUTH KOREA
K LEAGUE 2

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jeju United (P)	27	18	6	3	50	23	60
Suwon FC (P)	27	17	3	7	52	28	54
Gyeongnam FC	27	10	9	8	40	37	39
Daejeon Hana Citizen	27	11	6	10	36	35	39
Seoul E-Land FC	27	11	6	10	33	30	39
Jeonnam Dragons	27	8	14	5	31	25	38
Ansan Greeners FC	27	7	7	13	18	34	28
Bucheon FC 1995	27	7	5	15	19	36	26
FC Anyang	27	6	7	14	27	38	25
Chungnam Asan	27	5	7	15	20	40	22

Semi-Final Play-Off

Nov 25 - Changwon
Gyeongnam FC 1 (Kyung-min 70)
Daejeon Hana Citizen 1 (Edinho 61)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Yong-woo (Kor)

Final Play-Off

Nov 29 - Suwon
Suwon FC 1 (Byong-jun 90+8 pen)
Gyeongnam FC 1 (Choi Jun 27)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Jong-hyeok (Kor)
Suwon FC are promoted to K League 1 after finishing higher in the league standings

International football

AFRICA

AFCON 2022 QUALIFICATION

Group A

Nov 11 - Conakry
Guinea 1 (M. Camara 44)
Chad 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Maarouf (Egy)

Nov 13 - Bamako
Mali 1 (El Bilal Toure 33 pen)
Namibia 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Moussa (Nig)

Nov 15 - N'Djamena
Chad 1 (Ahmat 45)
Guinea 1 (Keita 24)
HT: 1-1. Ref: Sanogo (Bfa)

Nov 17 - Windhoek
Namibia 1 (Kambindu 39)
Mali 2 (Koita 12, Doumbia 37)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Adelaid (Com)

GROUP A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mali	4	3	1	0	7	3	10
Guinea	4	2	2	0	6	3	8
Namibia	4	1	0	3	3	6	3
Chad	4	0	1	3	2	6	1

Group B

Nov 12 - Entebbe
Uganda 1 (Lwaliwa 86)
South Sudan 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Nkounkou (Cgo)

Nov 12 - Ouagadougou
Burkina Faso 3 (L. Traore 2, 25, Dabo 90 pen)
Malawi 1 (Phiri Junior 80 pen)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Dahane (Mtn)

Nov 16 - Nairobi
South Sudan 1 (Okello 36 pen)
Uganda 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Houngnandande (Ben)

Nov 16 - Blantyre
Malawi 0
Burkina Faso 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ahmed Djama (Dji)

GROUP B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Burkina Faso	4	2	2	0	5	2	8
Uganda	4	2	1	1	3	1	7
Malawi	4	1	1	2	2	5	4
South Sudan	4	1	0	3	2	4	3

Group C

Nov 12 - Cape Coast
Ghana 2 (A. Ayew 19, 81)
Sudan 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref**: N'Diaye (Sen)

Nov 12 -Johannesburg
South Africa 2 (Tau 55 pen, Zungu 90)
Sao Tome and Principe 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sibandze (Swz)

Nov 16 - Port Elizabeth
Sao Tome and Principe 2 (Soares 12, Harramiz 75)
South Africa 4 (Zwane 39, 87, Tau 70, 88)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Tawel Camara (Gui)

Nov 17 - Omdurman
Sudan 1 (Abdelrahman 90)
Ghana 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Bondo (Bot)

GROUP C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana	4	3	0	1	5	1	9
South Africa	4	3	0	1	7	4	9
Sudan	4	2	0	2	5	3	6
Sao Tome and Principe	4	0	0	4	2	11	0

Group D

Nov 12 - Franceville
Gabon 2 (Bouanga 8, Aubameyang 55)
Gambia 1 (Jobe 81)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Attiogbe (Tog)

Nov 14 - Kinshasa
DR Congo 0
Angola 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Selmi (Tun)

Nov 16 - Bakau
Gambia 2 (Modou Barrow 49, Musa Barrow 79)
Gabon 1 (Ecuele Manga 89)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ndabihawenimana (Bdi)

Nov 17 - Talatona
Angola 0
DR Congo 1 (Kebano 63)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Gomes (Rsa)

GROUP D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gambia	4	2	1	1	8	6	7
Gabon	4	2	1	1	5	4	7
DR Congo	4	1	3	0	3	2	6
Angola	4	0	1	3	2	6	1

Group E

Nov 11 - Nouakchott
Mauritania 1 (N'Diaye 30)
Burundi 1 (Ntibazonkiza 79)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Allaou Mahamat (Cha)

Nov 13 - Casablanca
Morocco 4 (Hakimi 10, Ziyech 31 pen, 33, Aboukhlal 64)
Central African Republic 1 (Mafouta 25)
HT: 3-1. **Ref:** Traore (Mli)

Nov 15 - Bujumbura
Burundi 3 (Ntibazonkiza 6, 55, Ndayishimiye 46)
Mauritania 1 (Ndioko Niass 27)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Molise (Les)

Nov 17 - Douala
Central African Republic 0
Morocco 2 (Ziyech 39, En-Nesyri 90)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Otogo-Castane (Gab)

GROUP E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco	4	3	1	0	9	1	10
Mauritania	4	1	2	1	4	4	5
Burundi	4	1	1	2	4	7	4
Central African Rep.	4	1	0	3	3	8	3

Group F

Nov 12 - Douala
Cameroon 4 (Aboubakar 38, 47, Anguissa 58, N'Jie 80)
Mozambique 1 (Kamo-Kamo 74)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Traore (Civ)

Nov 12 - Praia
Cape Verde 0
Rwanda 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Laryea (Gha)

Nov 16 - Maputo
Mozambique 0
Cameroon 2 (Aboubakar 26, Tabekou 73)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Camille (Sey)

Nov 17 - Kigali
Rwanda 0
Cape Verde 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Rakotojaona (Mad)

GROUP F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon	4	3	1	0	7	1	10
Mozambique	4	1	1	2	5	8	4
Cape Verde	4	0	4	0	2	2	4
Rwanda	4	0	2	2	0	3	2

Group G

Nov 11 - Nairobi
Kenya 1 (Juma 65)
Comoros 1 (M'Changama 26)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Ibrahim (Lby)

Nov 14 - Cairo
Egypt 1 (El Wensh 54)
Togo 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Hakizimana (Rwa)

Nov 15 - Moroni
Comoros 2 (Fardou Ben 22, Mattoir 49)
Kenya 1 (Nyakeya 36)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Weyesa (Eth)

Nov 17 - Lome
Togo 1 (Nya-Vedji 90+3)
Egypt 3 (Afsha 18, Sherif 32, Trezeguet 52)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Sy (Sen)

GROUP G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	4	2	2	0	5	2	8
Comoros	4	2	2	0	4	2	8
Kenya	4	0	3	1	4	5	3
Togo	4	0	1	3	2	6	1

Group H

Nov 12 - Lusaka
Zambia 2 (Mwepu 45+2, Sikombe 67)
Botswana 1 (Orebonye 45)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Ndala (Cod)

Nov 12 - Algiers
Algeria 3 (Bounedjah 31, Feghouli 42, Mahrez 67)
Zimbabwe 1 (Kadewere 80)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Alioum (Cmr)

Nov 16 - Harare
Zimbabwe 2 (Musona 44, Dube 82)
Algeria 2 (Delort 34, Mahrez 38)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Ismail (Sdn)

Nov 16 - Francistown
Botswana 1 (Gaolaolwe 6)
Zambia 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Chizinga (Mwi)

GROUP H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	4	3	1	0	11	3	10
Zimbabwe	4	1	2	1	5	6	5
Botswana	4	1	1	2	2	3	4
Zambia	4	1	0	3	3	9	3

Group I

Nov 11 - Thies
Senegal 2 (Mane 44 pen, Nguette 74)
Guinea-Bissau 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Otogo-Castane

Nov 12 - Brazzaville
Congo 2 (Ibara 77, Makiesse 81)
Eswatini 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ogabor (Nga)

Nov 15 - Bissau
Guinea-Bissau 0
Senegal 1 (Mane 82)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Zaourak (Mar)

Nov 16 - Manzini
Eswatini 0
Congo 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Hagi (Som)

GROUP I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal	4	4	0	0	9	1	12
Congo	4	2	1	1	5	2	7
Guinea-Bissau	4	1	0	3	3	6	3
Eswatini	4	0	1	3	1	9	1

Group J

Nov 11 - Cairo
Libya 2 (Al Warfali 55 pen, Bettamer 58)
Equatorial Guinea 3 (Miranda 33, Obiang 90+1, Obama 90+4)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Gassama (Gam)

Nov 13 - Rades
Tunisia 1 (Msakni 18 pen)
Tanzania 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Carvalho (Ang)

Nov 15 - Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Salvador 27)
Libya 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Mantemera (Zim)

Nov 17 - Dar es Salaam
Tanzania 1 (Salum 48)
Tunisia 1 (Khaoui 11)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Alvacao (Moz)

GROUP J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia	4	3	1	0	7	2	10
Equatorial Guinea	4	2	0	2	5	5	6
Tanzania	4	1	1	2	4	5	4
Libya	4	1	0	3	5	9	3

Group K

Nov 12 - Abidjan
Ivory Coast 2 (Gervinho 48, Haller 55)
Madagascar 1 (Voavy 59)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Guirat (Tun)

Nov 13 – Niamey
Niger 1 (Oumarou 73 pen)
Ethiopia 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Corneh (Lbr)

Nov 17 - Bahir Dar
Ethiopia 3 (Gebremichael 13, Mohammed 43, Kebede 70)
Niger 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Williams (Sle)

Nov 17 - Toamasina
Madagascar 1 Amada (51)
Ivory Coast 1 (Kessie 15 pen)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Grisha (Egy)

GROUP K

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast	4	2	1	1	5	4	7
Madagascar	4	2	1	1	9	5	7
Ethiopia	4	2	0	2	5	3	6
Niger	4	1	0	3	3	10	3

Group L

Nov 13 - Benin City
Nigeria 4 (Iwobi 4, 27, Osimhen 21, Chukwueze 29)
Sierra Leone 4 (Quee 41, Kamara 72, 86, Bundu 80)
HT: 4-1. **Ref:** Waweru (Ken)

Nov 14 - Porto-Novo
Benin 1 (Dossou 24)
Lesotho 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Sikazwe (Zam)

Nov 17 - Maseru
Lesotho 0
Benin 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sabilla (Uga)

Nov 17 - Freetown
Sierra Leone 0
Nigeria 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Charef (Alg)

GROUP L

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nigeria	4	2	2	0	10	7	8
Benin	4	2	1	1	3	2	7
Sierra Leone	4	0	3	1	5	6	3
Lesotho	4	0	2	2	3	6	2

ASIA

WORLD CUP 2022 QUALIFIERS

Second Round Group Stage

Group E

Dec 4 - Doha
Qatar 5 (Hatem 9, Afif 33, 90+2, Ali 72 pen, 78)
Bangladesh 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Yaacob (Mas)

GROUP E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar	6	5	1	0	16	1	16
Oman	5	4	0	1	11	4	12
Afghanistan	5	1	1	3	2	11	4
India	5	0	3	2	3	5	3
Bangladesh	5	0	1	4	2	13	1

All remaining group stage matches in Asian World Cup qualiying recommences in March 2021

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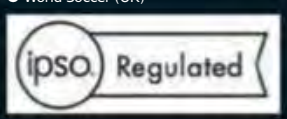

Home comforts...MAPFRE Stadium has been the home of Columbus Crew since 1999

MAPFRE STADIUM

Location: Ohio, United States
Team: Columbus Crew
Built: 1999
Capacity: 19,968

Given that Columbus Crew are expected to move into their new $300 million stadium later this year, The Black and Gold's 3-0 win against Seattle Sounders in the MLS Cup final in December was a fitting way to play out one of their final games at the MAPFRE Stadium.

Previously known as the Columbus Crew Stadium, the 19,968-seater arena will go down in history as Major League Soccer's first soccer-specific stadium.

Having been built in only nine months at a cost of $28.5m in 1999, the MAPFRE Stadium has quickly fallen behind the quality of other newly built soccer-specific stadiums in the United States.

Once relocated to the New Columbus Crew Stadium, the club's hierarchy plan to redevelop their current stadium into the team's training centre, as well as a community sports park.

In addition to being the home of Columbus Crew, the MAPFRE Stadium will also be remembered for hosting several memorable international matches for both the United States men's and women's sides.

Ageing...the view from outside the stadium

Historic... USA celebrate beating Mexico back in 2013

Victory...Columbus Crew lift the 2020 MLS Cup

GREATEST GAMES

2003 September 28
USA Women 3-0 North Korea Women

In the first competitive game to be played by the USWNT at the Columbus Crew Stadium, April Heinrichs' side secured a comfortable 3-0 victory against North Korea in the 2003 Women's World Cup group stage. It was a particularly memorable game for college senior Cat Whitehill, as she scored twice within an 18-minute period in the second-half.

2013 September 10
USA 2-0 Mexico

This World Cup qualifier was the USA's fourth consecutive victory against their neighbours. Eddie Johnson's 49th-minute goal cut the tension inside a roaring Columbus Crew Stadium. Around 30 minutes later, Landon Donovan tapped home to double his country's advantage, much to the delight of the home crowd. After the game the players re-emerged from the tunnel to celebrate again after Honduras and Panama drew, ensuring an automatic qualifying spot for the USA.

2020 December 12
Columbus Crew 3-0 Seattle Sounders

In what is likely to be one of the last big matches at the MAPFRE Stadium, an inspired display from club-record signing Lucas Zelarayan secured Columbus Crew their first MLS title since 2008. The Argentine was the first player to score twice in an MLS Cup final since Alecko Eskandarian back in 2004.

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